

Gateway

*John
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GATEWAY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Army Without Banners

GATEWAY

By JOHN BEAMES

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CHAPTER I

It was the morning of July 1st, Canada's national holiday, and all the little stores on Water Street, with their high false fronts, were closed. Water Street was Gateway. It was three miles long, with a sawmill at either end, and followed the wide windings of the Sweetwater River.

The Sweetwater, at the height of its summer rise, went swiftly by, bearing upon its muddy current masses of foam and driftwood. Upon its further bank, decently veiled in green leaves, stood a scattered line of squalid log shanties, known locally as Philadelphia, and inhabited by halfbreeds with no manners, no morals and an ancient and ineradicable custom of getting drunk whenever possible.

Beyond, a line of low sandhills forested with jackpine closed the prospect. Behind that lay the mysterious North, out of which there came at intervals bateaux manned by crimson-sashed voyageurs or trains of savage-eyed husky dogs dragging sleighs loaded with furs.

Over all arched that high, intensely blue, cloudless sky, which the West regards as of the natural order of things.

It was already very hot, and only a few people moved

languidly along the town's broadest sidewalk, a full eight feet wide, but the polity of the dogs was in full activity. Gateway held something like two dogs for every human being in the place. They were of all sizes and breeds, and they paraded in companies and battalions, with a grave air of doing something very important, varied by an occasional whirlwind frolic or noisy fight.

Four Indians, three in ragged overalls and cotton shirts, the fourth in a grey blanket, with an eagle feather in his braided hair and a patch of vermilion on either cheek, squatted in a circle by the ferry capstan. They passed a pipe from hand to hand, each taking a few puffs in turn, and conversed in low gutturals. They were doing nothing with all the dignity the red man contrives to put into that occupation.

This was the normal condition of Gateway, but it could be quite a lively little town. When gangs of lumberjacks, filled with bad whiskey and the lust of war, ranged yelling through the streets, life could become mildly exciting.

* * *

In a small frame house, painted white and set in a grove of poplars not far from Water Street, Richard Black was having breakfast with his widowed mother.

He was a good looking young man of twenty-two, wide-shouldered and straight-backed, with an unruly mop of brown hair, a candid blue eye and a ready laugh. The gods had endowed him with a sense of humour, as yet immature, courage and a strain of idealism.

His mother was spare and bent, with a curious toppling walk that seemed always about to end in her falling on her nose. An affection of the eyes caused her continually to shed tears and sniff in a poignant fashion, though actually

her temperament was extremely equable and even merry. She derived much enjoyment from the most unexpected things.

"I s'pose you're takin' Molly McLay to the races 's afternoon?" she inquired.

"Uh-huh," admitted Dick in a voice muffled by hot cakes and maple syrup.

"Goin' to drive that new trottin' mare of yours, I reckon, an' put up a big front."

"Mph."

"Oh well, I guess you will do it if you will, but you want to be keerful. You mind when Luke Mosby took out his new horse first time an' it run away on him an' busted his leg an' he ain't never had the right use of it sense an' him in bed four months an' the doctor bill somethin' ter'ble . . ."

"Guess maybe I can handle a horse better'n that four-footed Luke Mosby," interrupted Dick.

"Maybe you can, son, maybe you can. But young fellers always will be takin' big chances an' they gets busted up like the way Hoyle Williams was the time the stage tipped off the ferry an' him drunk an' it's a wonder they ever got him out of the river . . ."

Dick did not even pretend to listen. Like a man who lives by a brawling stream, the perpetual sound of his mother's voice formed an unnoticed background to his consciousness. He ignored it and went on thinking about Molly McLay.

But presently he was aware that she was asking a question. "What's that, ma?"

"Must have cost you a pile of money that mare an' that swell rubber-tired buggy too, more'n you can afford, I bet?"

Dick blushed. The turn-out had cost him more than it ought, but then nothing was too good for Molly. He mumbled something inarticulate.

"Your poor pa always did say you was too come-easy, go-easy with your money."

"Dad never gave me any money, so how did he know?"

"Almost the very last words your poor pa said to me," his mother went on, sniffing and wiping her eyes, though whether in tribute to the memory of the departed or merely because of her affliction it was impossible to say, "Almost the very last words he said to me 'cept when he asked was the light out in the kitchen an' could the cat get to the butter, almost his last words was: 'Dickie'll shoot in all the money I leave him sure as spuds'll freeze. That's why I tied up your little bit so neither one of you can get at it. You ain't neither of you got no head for money. Well, he'll shoot it in an' then he'll have to get down to work an' cut out foolin'!' An' then he commenced to ask about the kitchen light an' the cat an' the butter, an' right away he took his last spell. But that's just what he says to me, he says, 'Dickie'll shoot in every last cent of his money.'"

Dick had heard his father's last words repeated, with variations, so often already that they no longer impressed him. He had a well-founded grievance against his father, and he merely grunted and reached for the teapot.

"Well, there it is," continued his mother. "I guess you'll go right ahead an' do just the way he said."

She paused for a full minute after this remark, a proceeding so unusual that her son looked up at her in surprise. He found her gazing at him as intently as her perpetually swimming eyes would permit.

"You figurin' to marry Molly McLay, son, mff?"

Dick flushed and lowered his eyes. "Maybe," he said gruffly.

Mrs. Black sniffed again, wiped her eyes and sighed deeply. "Oh well, if you say so, maybe. But I don't know what like of a wife she'll make. Can she cook? Always seemed pretty flighty to me an' I notice her mother does all the washin', her an' the young girl Maggie, an' I never heard much of Molly doin' much no time except look pretty, an' I bet it's nobody's snap to keep them white dresses starched an' ironed up the way she always wears in summer . . ."

"What's it matter if she can't cook?" interrupted Dick.

"It does so matter a whole lot. Does she know you got a weak stummick, mff? I s'pose you didn't tell her an' she never asked you . . ."

"No, she didn't, an' I didn't, an' I ain't either."

"You have so, Richard Ellemore Black, an' didn't your own mother ought to know? Ain't I give you enough medicine to float a scow?—an' pills, you come mighty nigh bein' raised on pills."

"Don't I know it?" grumbled Dick. "If I'd taken the half of the stuff you tried to pour into me different times you could use me for a drugstore by now. The only reason I'm alive to-day is because most of the dope went in the slop pail when you wasn't lookin'."

"You always was that self-willed," said the mother with another sniff and another sigh and another dab at her eyes with her apron. "Your wife'll find you a handful, I bet. But you do have a weak stummick just like your poor pa—he couldn't ever go pork an' onions—an' I'll tell your wife so when you get her."

"You would," said Dick ungraciously.

"Well, go along now," said his mother. "I got to go over to Mrs. Poke's—her little boy is ailin'—it looks to me like he's got the diftheery—anyway I'm goin' to take her over some medicine what I used on you when you had sore throat an' it done you good . . ."

Dick came over and gave her a kiss. He was very fond of her, though they bickered a good deal. Then he lit his pipe and lounged off down town. Though the stores were closed, the bars remained wide open and were doing a roaring trade. The sawmill hands were off for the day and enjoying themselves. Already one or two very pretty fights had been staged in the street, but the hilarity would not become marked until afternoon.

Dick had a drink with a friend in the Palace bar and another at the Imperial, but he was a feeble toper compared with his late father, who had belonged to a generation which considered sobriety unbecoming in a man after sunset. Two drinks amply sufficed Dick, and he drifted home for dinner, afterwards arraying himself with great care in order to find favour in the eyes of his beloved.

In a suit of almost regal purple, a crimson and gold tie, a tall butterfly-winged collar, a high-crowned derby with a narrow rolled brim, and bright yellow shoes with knobby toes, he felt that he had done himself justice. Pulling on his gloves, he walked down to the livery stable to get his horse.

A dejected looking individual sat on an overturned bucket by the door. There was hay on his flapping felt hat and tobacco juice exuded from the corners of his mouth. He smelt equine and closely resembled a worn-out plough horse.

" Well, Jerry, how's the little mare ? " asked Dick.

Jerry lifted a dim eye, spat deliberately, hunched one shoulder, and drawled, " All right, I guess, 'less she took the blind staggers in the last half hour. Takin' her to the races ? " .

" That's what I figure on."

Jerry rose with a weary sigh and shuffled into the barn. He returned presently with a bright chestnut mare of fourteen hands, as dainty, high-strung and high-stepping a little piece of equine femininity as ever delighted the eye of a horse-lover in the days when horses were still the aristocratic mode of locomotion. Her name was Bluebird.

He hitched her to a spider-wheeled, rubber-tired buggy, painted a bright blue, with scarlet trimmings, and handed the reins up to Dick. With the gaudy laprobe tastefully adjusted, and a feeling of pride in his heart that was reflected in his open countenance, Dick whistled to the mare and went bowling down the street at a brisk twelve miles an hour.

Dick drew rein at the gate of a neat blue cottage with a red roof, and whistled long and shrilly with his finger in his mouth. Presently the cottage door opened and a tall girl stepped into the sunlight, a wonderfully well-proportioned girl, brilliantly blonde, crimson-lipped, clear-skinned. But her lips closed too firmly, and the glitter in her blue eyes was frosty, like ice seen afar off.

Even so, there was probably no handsomer girl on earth that afternoon than Molly McLay, and certainly none more fully aware of it.

Dick had no criticisms to make ; she was his goddess, without speck or flaw. She was there to adore, and he

adored her. He believed quite simply that her soul was as lovely as her face ; he attributed to her without reserve all the virtues he most revered and admired.

She approached languidly, swinging a frilly parasol in one hand and holding up her long white linen skirt with the other.

" Some outfit you have there, Dickie," she observed in a rich lazy contralto.

Dick flushed and smiled tremulously. He had bought it to do honour to her. " Glad you like it, Moll. Now I can take you some nice drives, eh ? "

She nodded graciously.

He jumped down, but maintained a firm grip on the reins, for Bluebird was dancing with impatience. With joy and reverence he assisted her to climb into the tall vehicle, and carefully adjusted the laprobe around her.

Then he gave Bluebird her head and away they went, the buggy wheels twinkling through a haze of dust, and Molly's fluttering parasol looking like a great white flower. She leant back languidly. She was seldom conversational. Her role in life was to look statuesquely beautiful, and to accept with lazy hands all good things that admiration offered her.

Her only remark was, " This outfit must have cost something, Dickie. Nothing cheap about you, eh ? "

He reddened with pleasure. " Well, what's the use of money if you don't get some good of it eh, Moll ? A man's only young once in his life."

She smiled assent and settled back in her place. Her face maintained its sculptural lines, but her eyes were alert. The dusty road to the town fair grounds was thronged with rigs, and she was busy comparing the various turn-outs with the one she rode in.

Life afforded her few greater pleasures than the malignant gleam in the eyes of an envious woman, and as she caught one such glance after another, a gentle happiness pervaded her whole being. She was indubitably the loveliest, the best-dressed, and the best turned-out of them all, and her escort was the handsomest and most prosperous young bachelor in Gateway.

They whirled into the grounds, and Dick tied Bluebird to the long hitching rack, and escorted Molly to the rambling unpainted grandstand. He spread his handkerchief carefully on the dusty bench for her to sit upon. The proceedings had already begun.

They were running off the preliminary heats in the trotting races on the half-mile dirt track, and within the circle of the track a lively baseball game was in progress. The Lily Grove nine, husky young bush farmers, were wrestling for the championship of the district with the Gateway Giants, chiefly young store clerks.

The Giants were more scientific, but what the Lilies lacked in pitching and fielding they made up in hitting and running. The game was noisy and confused, and was gradually working up to the inevitable climax.

Dick, who had played the game enthusiastically himself until devotion to Molly claimed him, began to betray great excitement.

"Oh, do sit down," begged Molly. "I don't know why you want to get so worked up over just a game."

Dick groaned and sat down, his hands working convulsively.

The umpire gave a close decision against a Giant, and he was on his feet in a moment waving his arms and bellowing, "Robber, thief. He was safe by a mile."

He turned to explain his grievance to Molly, but she listened to him with a pained and uncomprehending look. "I think you're crazy," she said.

The inevitable descended in the eighth inning. A Lily sliding to second base was given out by the umpire, and promptly took a swing at the second baseman.

Horse-racing was temporarily suspended; spectators streamed upon the field and entered into the grand contest of the day as active participants or vociferous disputants.

"Dick Black, you stay here or I'll never speak to you again," said Molly sternly. "You'll get your clothes all torn. I don't know why men want to fight so over a fool game."

There was an implied proprietorship in the words that Dick found sweet. Molly cared what happened to him. He sat down again meekly.

A tall mounted policeman, looking very gallant and authoritative in his scarlet tunic, spurred his horse into the midst of the fight and separated the combatants with a few calm but forceful words, threatening all and sundry with immediate arrest if they did not desist.

He was obeyed, but the game and its attendant wrangles had already taken up so much time, and the temper of the teams was such, that it was decided to suspend the play.

All attention could now be concentrated on the races.

There were more trotting races, and then a pony race by yelling painted Indians riding bareback, and then the final trotting heats.

* * *

There was a good deal of unofficial betting on these races, and Colonel Robert Lee Long had made a book. The

Colonel gave himself out as a gentlemen of the old Southern school, and dressed the part in a tight and shiny Prince Albert coat, broad-brimmed felt hat and grey trousers. He set up as an expert on whiskey, women, cards and horses, and asserted that he was a veteran of the Spanish-American war.

What he was doing in Gateway was no more apparent than his means of subsistence. He hinted darkly that he had resigned his commission in the United States Army on a point of honour. The West smiled with tolerant scepticism ; it was not etiquette to inquire closely into a man's antecedents.

The truth was that he had deserted from an American cavalry regiment, and his name was not Robert Lee Long but William Schwartz, born in Pittsburg. His sentimental and romantic nature had been deeply impressed by the old Southern colonel of cheap melodrama, and he had assimilated the stage mannerisms of the part half unconsciously long before his flight into Canada. He had almost succeeded in deluding himself into the belief that he was actually what he pretended to be. In person he was tall and ponderous, if flabby, and his walk was majestic and imposing.

His companion to-day was a man of species already hastening to extinction, an English remittance man. Sir William Quigley, Bart., could count thirty generations of titled ancestry, but had sunk to a level where he was so universally known as Cracker that few knew him by any other name.

Having run through a small fortune and acquired in lieu thereof a reputation that was no asset to anyone, a younger brother who had prospered in trade had offered

him ten pounds a month to take up his residence in a far land. For several years now the genial baronet had more or less adorned Gateway with his presence.

He was a little man, very bow-legged, in a very ancient tweed suit of English cut and a cloth cap. He had a moist eye, a red nose, and a fluffy grey moustache.

The pair were seated immediately behind Dick and Molly, and the Colonel's comments were plainly audible, delivered in a deep voice in which the traditional Southern drawl mingled curiously with the thick guttural enunciation of the Pennsylvania Dutch. The races were not going well for him and he was making no secret of it.

Cracker, it being in the desert time between remittances, had nothing to wager and so remained undisturbed and cheerful.

There swung into the home stretch a field of five, a black and two bays well bunched, a brown hanging on their flanks and a wild-eyed chestnut close behind. Jerry M. had an uncertain temper and a reputation for breaking. He had been indulging his weakness and seemed definitely out of the running.

The Colonel smiled. He desired Nigger Boy to win and Nigger Boy was leading by half a length.

But Jerry M had a good driver, and if Jerry M decided to win there was nothing on that track he could not pass. If not, an application of the whip would probably cause him to halt and kick the sulky to pieces. This amiable propensity had banished him from the big tracks, where his really wonderful turn of speed might have made his lucky owner a fortune.

With horses as with men, the Canadian West was still a refuge for misfits.

Jerry M had made up his mind for once that he was going to win. His long legs moved with the speed and precision of machinery. He poured himself along the track. He passed a bay, then the brown, then the other bay. Nigger Boy was well out in front, trotting beautifully.

Jerry M began to overhaul him rapidly. His lean and savage head, yellow teeth agleam, was abreast of the sulky, crept along Nigger Boy's heaving flanks, was in line with his shoulder. Nigger Boy's driver was whipping furiously : Jerry M's driver wisely kept still.

The crowd was on its feet whooping. A final roar as the two went under the wire neck and neck. Silence, and then one of the judges blaring through a megaphone, " Jerry M by a head."

The Colonel sputtered a full-flavoured oath, and Cracker giggled behind his hand.

" Got to see into this," bellowed the Colonel. " Can't have them crooks flim-flammin' me thataway. Nigger Boy won by a clear head. I'm agoin' to look into this—goin' to look into it, sir."

He brushed roughly past Molly, ignoring the indignant look she flung at him, and charged down upon the track, Cracker grinning at his heels. There, unhappily, he encountered Spud Murphy, just in from the log rafting grounds with a number of his mates.

Spud had absorbed seven drinks of whiskey. He had a pronounced love of fighting at any time, but it needed several drinks of raw rye to put him in the proper hair-trigger state of pugnacity.

He wore a mackinaw shirt in a chaste design of large red and black squares, with the tail hanging out behind, trousers of blue denim cut off at the knee, crimson woollen socks and

high boots with a treble row of sharp steel spikes in their soles. A small black felt hat was perched over his right ear.

He heard the Colonel bellowing wrathfully as a warhorse hears the trumpet. He cocked his head and twitched his shoulders, and came dancing up with a peculiar swaying motion.

"An' might I so kindly ask who give you a license to holler?" he demanded with a warlike grin.

"Get out of my road," roared the Colonel, towering over him menacingly.

Spud gave a jerk to his head that tilted his hat over the other ear. "An' who sold you the road, old sowbelly?"

The Colonel unwisely gave him a rough push.

"Hah!" ejaculated Spud with intense satisfaction. "Here's guts."

He danced three steps backward, two to one side, two to the other, gathered himself together and launched himself like a thunderbolt. The impact was terrible. The Colonel struck the ground with a heavy thud and lay staring upward in a dazed manner.

Cracker's evil star being in the ascendant, he bent over his recumbent friend and chuckled, "Nasty one that, old man, eh?"

"Think so?" said Spud grimly. "Who asked you? Gettin' in on this pretty cheap, ain't you? Here's one for you."

Cracker was knocked sprawling across his prostrate friend.

Tears of indignation came into Spud's eyes. "Hornin' in on me like this," he cried grievously. "Did I ask 'em? What was I doin' to 'em that they'd pick on me that way?"

I'm goin' to put the boots to 'em."

In another second he would doubtless have leaped upon them with his terrible spiked boots, but Jim Boley, his own particular chum, caught him by the sleeve.

"Aw, now, Spud," he coaxed, "don't be puttin' the boots to poor shoats like them. Here's Skookum over here claimin' he can trim you—drunk or sober. Wants to know where you're hidin' out on him."

Up went Spud's pugnacious head. "Hah, Skookum. Where? Lead me to um. Not that I'm a fightin' man, Jimmy, not that a poor old broken-down, knock-kneed, sway-backed old skate like me claims as he can fight. But what I says is, Jimmy, what I says is, if he's huntin' trouble, why, I says, lead me to um."

He jammed his hat down over his eyes, humped his back, stuck out his elbows, turned in his toes, and danced grotesquely off in search of his great rival as a fighting man among the Gateway river drivers.

The self-confessed hero of San Juan Hill rose slowly to his feet and gazed sternly round. "Where's that swine got to, Cracker?"

"The loathsome boulder ran away, Colonel. He hit me a most putrid wallop from behind and ran away."

"Lucky for him," said the Colonel. "Lucky for him, sir. He'd best keep out of my road from this on. If he hadn't taken me by surprise, sir . . ."

"Oh, I'm tired of watching all these men fighting," said Molly pettishly. "They can't ever do anything but fight in this town."

"Oh, but they'll be runnin' the next race right away," said Dick. "See, they're clearin' the track."

"No. I've seen enough horse races; they're all the

same."

Dick, as your true lover should do, read the signs aright.

"Well, shall we go an' get something to eat?" he suggested.

Molly smiled and rose.

Seated in a marquee set up by a local church ladies' aid, she absorbed chicken and fried potatoes, tea, doughnuts, cake and pie, not ungracefully, but with a little too obvious an eagerness. There was a reason for this: her father, Alexander McLay, was a very frugal man and kept a lean table. At home she lived chiefly on oatmeal and potatoes, and her large personality required a good deal of sustenance.

But even her appetite was satisfied at last.

"How about a little drive now?" coaxed Dick.

"All right, but we can't stay out too long, I've got to be home an' dress for the dance."

Dick's lower lip stuck out sulkily, for he knew she was going to the dance with his well-hated rival, Conquest Gates, but he never dreamed of questioning her decisions. What Molly did must be right.

The sun was still high, the road hard and dry, and Bluebird eager to go. A gentle breeze tempered the fierce rays of the sun, and set the ever-restless leaves of the white poplars dancing and rustling. Many-coloured wild flowers tinted the pastures, among which tall crimson lilies blazed conspicuously. On the plough land knee-high stands of wheat and oats swept away in green undulating waves before the wind.

Meadow larks whistled musically on fenceposts and purple martins hawked back and forth after mosquitoes. Wide-winged hawks sailed high overhead, and every pond had its little flock of whimpering grey and white terns.

Molly leant back in unruffled calm. She had been well fed, she was warm and comfortable, the incense of love was burning at her shrine, and she was not required to do anything. With that callous indifference to the rest of the world displayed by cats and many women, she was content.

Dick was happy and unhappy. He was happy because she was with him, unhappy because she was still so far away. He could feel her bodily presence, but the mysterious citadel of her soul remained inaccessible. He imagined it a place of deep and awful delights and wonders. How was he to know that it was empty and barren?

But he had been planning to speak for weeks. He had looked forward to this moment with wild hope and trembling awe. Everything was propitious except the cold expression on her flawless face. He took a deep breath and plunged.

"Don't you like me a little bit, Moll?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't be ridin' with you," she returned placidly.

"Oh, but I don't mean that—I mean, well, I mean, do you like me a heap. Would—would you marry me?" The words came out with a gasp.

A little crease appeared in Molly's smooth brow. She was annoyed. She had half-feared some such appeal, and she did not wish to give a definite answer, not yet at any rate. What she desired was to keep him dangling until she made up her mind at some indefinite time in the future.

"Aren't you in a hurry?" she said a trifle coldly.

"Oh, but Moll, I couldn't wait any longer—I just had to know."

"I haven't thought about it," she replied. "I don't know that I'm crazy to get married—it don't seem much

fun. Just because I go riding with you a few times . . ."

"I didn't say that, Moll, but I love you, and I'm so scared of losing you. Won't you think about it? I'll wait. I don't want to rush you, but if you'd only tell me some time soon."

"I don't know, I'll think about it, but I wish you wouldn't bother me."

He was abashed, but there was not only love in his soul, there was aching jealousy. Since he had broken the ice, he could not at once check himself.

"You're not thinking of marryin' Con Gates, Moll?"

A flash of mischief appeared in her brilliant blue eyes.

"I might, I might marry anybody, but I don't know yet, I haven't made up my mind."

"Oh, Moll, I love you so—nobody'll ever love you or take so much care of you as I will."

"Don't bother me, Dickie, I tell you I haven't thought of it. We'd better be turnin' back now, I have to be in time for the dance."

Dick sighed and pulled Bluebird round. The homeward drive was taken in silence, Molly holding herself a little stiffly, and Dick sunk in misery.

But when he helped her down at her gate, she relented and gave him her most breath-taking smile.

"That was a lovely ride, Dickie," she said softly. "You'll take me out again some other day, won't you?"

The clouds were dispelled in a moment. He beamed in adoration. "You bet I will, Moll, and don't be sore with me for what I said, I couldn't help it."

She laughed and turned toward the house.

"See you at the dance," he called after her, and she nodded.

CHAPTER II

GATEWAY was thoroughly awake now. As he drove along Water Street on his way to the livery barn, Dick passed throngs of promenading citizens. The promenade commenced, say, at the Palace bar at the east end, thence to the Imperial bar, and on to the Gateway House, at the west end. Liquid refreshment was taken at each stop. Thereafter steps were retraced.

As this had been going on all afternoon, the steps were growing uncertain and individual. Some gentlemen—ladies were conspicuously absent—trotted unsteadily from one telephone post to the next, there to cling for a breathing space. If, as sometimes happened, that particular post was already supporting a couple of other gentlemen, there was nothing for it but to fall back upon a store front. Several store windows had given under the strain already.

Some danced and sang in the exuberance of their hearts ; others wept for no assignable cause ; many reposed on the sidewalk, an insurmountable obstacle for wavering feet, and a few in the gutter. Certain small differences of opinion had developed and had been debated on their merits—with the aid of spiked boots.

No one interfered. Gateway's police force of one was still convalescing from an ill-advised attempt to arrest Hoohoo Brown for disturbing the peace. Hoohoo was in jail for the time being, but his friends were at large and no less disposed to regard peace as a vexation of the spirit.

But up at the Mounted Police barracks on the hill behind the town a sergeant sat within easy reach of the telephone, and the troopers of the detachment were standing to for the inevitable riot call.

All this was nothing new to Dick, who had grown up with the town. He noted with mild pride that Gateway was living up to its reputation as a place where celebrations were celebrations, and pulled Bluebird down to a walk to observe the antics of the crowd.

The most individual act presented for his entertainment seemed to be Pop Slingsby's. Pop was not a graceful walker at the best of times, being afflicted with very large, very flat feet, attached to legs that were long and thin and weak. They had to support a globular body of considerable weight, topped by a big, conical, bald head resting on round shoulders without the intervention of any perceptible neck.

Pop was in his shirtsleeves, but he trailed his coat after him by one sleeve. There was a grave and purposeful but worried look on his broad face, occasioned by his difficulty in walking. Having carefully planted one wayward foot, he attempted to get the other past it. Sometimes he succeeded, but generally he compromised by treading on his own toes. The ensuing struggle was terrible. The foot, underneath, did its best to free itself, and usually ended by upsetting its owner.

After he had fallen down in several different directions,

and had laboriously sorted out his curiously entangled legs, he gave it up as hopeless. The last Dick saw of him he was proceeding on all fours, still with that pre-occupied and resolute expression.

"What Maw Slingsby'll do to him will be plenty," reflected Dick with an inward chuckle.

The melancholy Jerry had been celebrating too. It had brought no cheer to his sad heart, for he wept as he led Bluebird away.

"Ain't nobody in the whole world gives a damn what comes of me," he complained in heartbroken tones.

Dick found his mother in a state of not unpleasing apprehension of what the lumberjacks would do when they arrived at the rioting point. She was Western born, and twice in her childhood had hidden in the bush from raiding Indian war parties. She found life in the well-policed present a little dull, and delighted in imagining lurid disasters as a relief to the monotony of existence.

"How was it down town, Dickie?"

"Oh, they're warmin' up, ma. Be something doin' after a while."

"Ain't set afire to nothing nor killed nobody yet?" she inquired wistfully.

"Not that I know of—haven't got that far yet."

"No, I guess not, but they will. An' Mrs. Poke's little boy that bad." She sniffed and wiped her eyes. "It's just what I told her, he'll have the diftheery sure, an' I wouldn't wonder but what he'll die of it. I'm goin' to set up with him to-night. Poor Mrs. Poke's wore to a frazzle tendin' him, she's that nervous her store teeth rattles, an' there ain't nobody to help her, an' I shouldn't wonder but

what them mis'ble lumberjacks sets afire to the house while I'm gone."

"Aw, they won't, ma."

"How do you know? An' I s'pose you won't be here neither. No, you'll be over to the dance an' the whole town can burn down for all you, just so that McLay girl's around. Oh well, that's what your poor pa always said about you, he said to me many's the time, he said, 'Just so Dick's gettin' his bit of fun all creation can go to thunder.' But never mind, you get your fun, an' if they set the house afire like they pretty near certainly will, and if everything's burnt up an' maybe me too if I don't have to set up with that poor child . . ."

Dick went up to his room and her voice died away behind him. He carefully examined his appearance and exchanged his gaudy tie for one still gaudier to do honour to the dance, for evening dress had not yet penetrated to Gateway.

He came down to find his mother still talking, as she continued to do all through supper. But no clear image of a word she said was formed in his mind. He picked up his hat with a casual, "So long, ma," and went out. She was still talking.

* * *

The dance was held in the town hall, a square brick box, with a conical bell tower at one corner. It was almost the only brick building in Gateway and filled a variety of useful functions. It was council chamber and tax office, firehall and police station and lock-up, theatre and public dance hall. Virtually everything of importance in Gateway happened at the town hall.

For to-night the seats in the auditorium had been folded up and put away and the floor had been well rubbed with

candle grease. The stage was hidden by a drop curtain on which was depicted a foaming waterfall descending from the summit of a snowclad mountain, with a tasteful border of advertisements. The council chamber had been converted into a refreshment bar and the town clerk's office into a cloak room for the ladies.

The orchestra consisted of an upright grand piano, a little out of tune, thumped by a heavy-fisted female of great endurance, and a solitary fiddle played by a one-eyed shoemaker.

All Gateway's socially elect were present ; the young men in Sunday clothes, padded shoulders, pegtop trousers, and collars of extraordinary height ; the girls in shirt-waists and voluminous skirts, their hair dressed in high-ratted pompadours.

Sally Peck, newly returned from a visit to Winnipeg, the Western Metropolis, alone flaunted evening dress, and her plump white shoulders rising above a low corsage, attracted all eyes. The girls sniffed or giggled, but the men were frankly or furtively delighted.

Dick, lounging watchfully by the door, presently saw Molly enter with Conquest Gates. Molly nodded brightly to him, but the men exchanged stony glances, and Con's heavy eyebrows drew down in an ugly scowl.

He was not a handsome young man. Black brows met across a rather flat nose, he had fierce little grey eyes, a savage mouth and an underhung jaw of a dull blue from recent shaving. He was short and solid and muscular, and walked heavily on his heels.

Dick wondered what Molly saw in him. He was too loyal to entertain the idea that Con, as the only son of Tom Gates, the miller, was a good match. Old Tom was known to be

rapidly failing, and Con was already in virtual control of the business, reputedly prosperous.

It had not escaped the notice of Gateway that Molly had succeeded in attaching to herself the only two unattached young men in town of any financial standing, and hostile and envious eyes were turned upon her from all sides.

Dick, detached from his beloved and leaning disconsolately against the wall, was to suffer another affliction. Golden Gates pounced upon him.

"Hello, Dickie," she said in a tone meant to be light, but which her hungry eyes belied. "Goin' to ask me for a dance tonight?"

"Sure, Golden," he replied with mournful courtesy. "Shall we have this one?"

Golden Gates resembled her brother Conquest in being short and dark and heavy-browed. But her nose was long thin and red, she sported a distinct moustache, and she was angular and swift-moving. A great deal of the gall of bitterness had been mixed in the honey of her soul, and she was spiteful to the verge of eccentricity.

No man had ever loved her, or ever would, but she loved men, and above all men she loved Dick Black. He did not even like her; it saddened him to look upon her and her acrid tongue terrified him.

Yet she was an exquisite dancer, the best in Gateway. She swooped over the floor in the waltz with the lightness and grace of a swallow. Dick was also an excellent dancer.

In the arms of the man she loved, swaying to the music, the polished floor gliding by under her feet, Golden was supremely happy for one moment in her self-tormenting life. Then she saw how Dick's eyes steadily followed the

majestic Molly, moving languidly over the floor with Con, and jealousy stabbed her like a knife.

With her intelligence warning her, "Don't, don't, keep quiet, you'll lose him if you say anything mean," her treacherous tongue was already loosing its poisoned barb.

"Looks as if Con was cutting you out tonight, Dickie."

Dick winced and a wave of red surged upward from his collar to his ears. He was not intuitive: to him it seemed only a gibe, the ill-mannered triumph of a sister at her brother's success. He laughed miserably but made no effort to reply. Not another word passed between them. In his mind was only an intense desire to be free of this hateful girl, in hers despair and remorse.

When the music stopped he led her hastily to the nearest chair, murmured a perfunctory, "Thanks, much obliged," and fled to ask Molly for a dance. Poor Golden sat down, a crimson spot on either sallow cheek and eyes glistening with unshed tears.

But Molly was not inclined to favour any cavalier unduly tonight. She was queen of the ball and kept state. Con, as her official escort, might have two dances, for all others one must suffice.

Dick could secure only a waltz three dances distant. Casting about to fill in the time until the moment for entering paradise should arrive, and keeping religiously away from Golden, he half-consciously sought Jessie Jenifree.

Not that he ordinarily gave Jessie a thought, but he had found her on other such occasions a soothing and restful companion. She was not dancing. She looked up, welcomed him with a pleasant smile, and motioned him to a seat beside her. He sank down gratefully.

He looked at Jessie with a friendly eye, trying idly to decide whether she were pretty or not. He was not in the mood to talk, but was quite willing to be entertained. This she proceeded to do, chattering softly about trifles. It was restful to talk to her : she indulged in no brilliant sallies such as keep wits on edge, nor in those cutting comments that make a man uncomfortable. One could never remember a word she had said, but one took away the feeling that it was pleasant to be with her.

Dick felt at liberty to let his mind wander where it chose. He kept an eye on Molly's movements, but he had time to decide that Jessie might be pretty if it were not for the crooked front tooth that made a little dent in her lower lip. A moment later he corrected the impression by deciding that the irregular tooth lent an individuality to a face otherwise commonplace.

Then he was on the point of concluding that it was the band of freckles across her nose that detracted from her looks, when he was surprised by the music coming to a pause. With a glow of gratitude to Jessie he realized that she had already whiled away for him a third of his period of purgatory.

" Well, how about this one, Jess? " he said cordially.

She rose at once. She was not as good a dancer as Golden, nor was there the bliss of holding Molly in his arms, but her dancing was like the rest of her, neat, accommodating and mildly enjoyable.

He was quite aggrieved when another partner claimed her for the following dance. He felt vaguely that she had no right to desert him when he had need of her company.

His wandering eyes encountered those of a slender girl of about seventeen. She was in a simple white dress with

her hair dressed low on the nape of her neck, and he found her face wonderfully attractive. Her eyebrows were finely arched, the eyes beneath large, a rich brown, and shaded by long lashes. Her nose was short, straight, a little blunt at the tip, and her mouth wide and firm, and there was just a suspicion of a dimple in her finely modelled chin. Her still immature form gave promise of a noble maturity and she was rather above medium height for a woman.

Her glance seemed to imply recognition, and he realised suddenly that here was the third member of the Gates tribe. This must be Pearly Gates, whom he seemed to remember but yesterday as a schoolgirl with remarkably long thin legs.

She was amazingly attractive, and he felt a strong desire to speak to her, but Golden was at her side, and he turned hastily away. He found himself facing the daringly gowned Sally Peck with her white shoulders.

On a thoughtless impulse he asked her to dance, and she showed several smiling creases in her plump cheeks and nestled happily into the hollow of his arm.

She was thoroughly enjoying her one hour of triumph. Her heart was light but her tread heavy, and she laughed loudly and often. In the past her practice of dancing on her partner's feet had not made her much in demand. Dick with several heel bruises on either foot, soon repented him of his temerity.

And then the long-awaited moment arrived, but Molly's eyes were like ice under a cloudy sky and her crimson mouth was set forbiddingly. Sally Peck was by way of being the counter-attraction tonight, a rival moon in the firmament, and she had no mind to let her servant follow strange goddesses.

"Quite a cut-up, ain't you?" she queried acidly. "It made me laugh to see that fat girl walkin' all over you, you looked awful foolish."

He defended himself abjectly.

"But, Moll, I had to dance with somebody, how'd I get through the time until our dance came around? I don't know what made me ask Sally, and she certainly walked on my feet: I'll be lame for a week."

Molly did not accept the apology. She prepared to punish him further. "I was just dancin' with Jim Crowley," she observed maliciously. "He's a dandy dancer an' he knows what dancin' is too. He's seen the world, not just this little backwoods burg. He told me I looked like Lillian Russell and I ought to go on the stage. Maybe I will too, I'm sick of this rotten little hole. There ain't a man in the place worth lookin' at, and no fun or anything."

Dick felt it would afford him acute satisfaction to punch the glib Jim Crowley in the eye, but said nothing.

Molly continued inexorably: "I've just got to get out of here. I'm goin' to ask dad can I go to the 'Peg, an' once I get there you bet I won't come back. A girl's buried alive in this miserable little hick town."

It became plain to Dick that he was not to have much enjoyment of this so eagerly awaited dance, but he took his punishment with resignation and fortitude.

* * *

"Firre! Rrrroll out de firre brrrigade. Sing Lee hees rrestaurant is burrn up. RRROLL OUT!!!"

A big dark man with a black moustache standing out on either side of his square face like a cat's whiskers, came

bellowing into the hall. It was Onesime Couronne, the head of the volunteer fire department.

At the same time the bell suspended in its tower overhead, burst into the mad jangle of the alarm.

Most of the brigade were present at the dance, and the fire engine stood in its shed behind the hall. With rueful glances at their best clothes the young men rushed out, Dick Black and Conquest Gates amongst them.

The festivities had culminated on Water Street in the periodical lumberjack riot. Two or three hundred river drivers and sawmill hands, having exhausted the pleasures of individual and gang combat, had entered upon an amusement always high in favour with them, the wrecking of a Chinese restaurant.

Sing Lee happened to be the selected victim. Seven scared and volubly protesting Chinese had been forcibly ejected from the premises, and all the chairs, tables, dishes and kitchen utensils hurled into the street through the shattered windows.

Lastly, some bright spirit had conceived the idea of throwing the kitchen range after them. But the range was too hot to be handled comfortably and upset in the process. Hot coals scattered over the wooden floor and set it alight.

Everybody present was quite charmed except the hapless Chinese and some lumberjacks who had scorched themselves badly with the stove.

With the volunteers hanging on with one hand and trying to get into their slickers and leather helmets at the same time, the pump, ladder truck and hose cart whirled down Maple Avenue and turned the corner into Water Street as fast as the horses could gallop.

At the same time six Royal North-West Mounted Police,

in full dress scarlet, a grizzled inspector at their head, came clattering down the hill to suppress the riot.

It was a little after midnight and the north-eastern sky was pale with the new dawn. A thick white mist rose from the river.

The driver of the pump hesitated to hurl his heavy vehicle into the heart of the yelling mob around the wrecked and smoking restaurant. He pulled up, shouting and clanging his bell. But the lumberjacks were determined not to have their simple amusements interfered with. They had started a very promising fire, and they were not in the mood to care if the whole town burnt down.

They opened a heavy barrage with empty whiskey bottles and lumps of dried mud. Hooting derisively, they seized the horses by their heads and tried to turn them round while others sought to drag the firemen from their perches.

A lumberjack caught Dick by the tail of his slicker.

"Come down off of that, you white-collar, son-of-a-bitch," he yelled.

"I'm comin'," answered Dick.

His soul was sore within him from Molly's ill-nature, and a fight was just what he needed. He jumped down and punched the lumberjack in the eye. It gave him a feeling of intense satisfaction to see the man go down.

The fire engines were all bunched together, and the firemen struggled valiantly with a mob that was passing rapidly from mere drunken boisterousness to ferocity.

Dick, with his slicker ripped up the back, was swapping punches busily with another lumberjack.

Into the tumult there penetrated a strident and commanding voice, "In the King's name, I warn this unlawful assembly to disperse."

The lumberjacks burst into shouts of hostility and derision, but the more sober and less warlike began to slip away. The inspector gave an order, and his troop closed up behind him. They drove through the heart of the mob like a spearhead, the men sitting their horses like statues, unmindful of the jeers and missiles showered upon them from all sides.

Dick, with one eye rapidly closing, landed a solid thump on the jaw of his antagonist, and saw his second man hit the ground.

The mounted police broke through, wheeled into line and came back at a trot. But this time they had their carbines in their hands and were prepared to use the butts.

But the lumberjacks had learnt of old and in sadness that it never pays to defy the "Mounties." They realised that their fun was at an end, and scattered hastily, all, that is, who were sober enough to run. But many were too drunk to stand alone, and the ground was strewn with bodies as if after a battle. The horses stepped gingerly to avoid treading on them.

Only a handful who still persisted in offering resistance were arrested. The drunks were dragged down to the river and soused into soberness before being set free. There were a few broken heads, but no one had been seriously hurt.

Many members of the late mob, as willing to put out a fire as to start one, assisted the firemen with the greatest good will to run the pump down to the water and man the hand levers. The hose was coupled up and run in through the front door, while two auxiliary bucket brigades were formed to keep adjoining buildings from catching fire.

All disturbance is sport to your lumberjack : profound peace alone bores his cheery and turbulent soul.

The fire was kept within bounds and though nothing remained of the leanto kitchen, the rest of the building was saved. Willing hands righted the stove and brought in from the street as much of the furniture and dishes as had escaped complete destruction.

Sing Lee took his loss with philosophic calm. Such incidents were among the drawbacks attendant on doing business in a barbarous land. He would sue the town for damages, as he had done once before on a somewhat similar occasion.

The fire brigade returned to the town hall, their Sunday suits ruined, and their faces bruised and smeared with soot.

There could be no question of going on with the dance, and Dick, after a long sad look at Molly being escorted by Con, sought Jessie Jenifree. But she was gone. Deeply disgusted with the entire universe and feeling very stiff and sore, he went home alone.

* * *

Conquest Gates was not the man to risk hard blows in any quarrel not his own, and he had come off lightly in the riot, but he was in an ill mood.

He felt that he had not had as much of Molly's company as he was entitled to as an escort, and he was suffering tortures of jealousy on account of the glib Jim Crowley, who was not a fireman, and had enjoyed a long conversation with Molly during the riot. He had even shown a strong desire to accompany her home, but the sight of Con's clenched fists and scowling brow had discouraged that effectually.

Molly was too indolent to talk much at any time, and just now she almost ignored her escort, strolling serenely and

indifferently along beside him, her head filled with visions of the theatrical triumphs Crowley had predicted for her if she ever chose to go on the stage.

Con broke silence abruptly. "I don't know what the devil makes me run crazy after you," he said savagely. "I don't believe you care a hoot for anybody on earth but yourself."

She arched her eyebrows at him and smiled in lazy mockery.

"You don't have to run after me," she murmured.

"Yes I do, I can't help myself an' you know it. That's why you treat me so, lettin' that grinnin' monkey face of a Jim Crowley talk slush to you half the night. He'd better watch out, I'll tie a knot in him one of these days it'll take six men to straighten out."

He stuck out his ugly lower jaw, and lifted his hairy fists. Molly was pleasantly thrilled, but not very greatly impressed. She had plenty of courage and the dawn light was already strong.

"Don't hurt poor Jimmy," she said, "there's no harm in him."

He caught her by the arm. "See here, Moll, are you goin' to marry me or ain't you? Say so one way or the other, give me something definite and I'll know what to do."

"Let go my arm," she evaded, "you're hurtin' me."

He relaxed his grip slightly without letting go. "Well, but answer me," he pressed her.

"I haven't made up my mind yet," she mocked, "and I don't have to marry anybody unless I want to."

"You answer me."

"If you don't let go my arm, Con Gates, I'll never speak

to you again. I mean it." Her tone was cold and determined.

His truculence was checked. It infuriated him that she refused to be bullied, but he consoled himself with the thought that once they were married he would make her suffer for all the misery she had caused him. Meanwhile he must dissemble.

"Oh, well, I'll be good," he said with a forced laugh.

"But you know, Moll, I'm so crazy about you that I don't hardly know what I'm sayin' sometimes."

"Well, you don't need to break my arm even if you are crazy," she pouted.

"Don't go on being mad," he coaxed. "I've said I'm sorry."

"All right, you be a good boy an' perhaps I'll think better of you."

"I'll be good, Molly, but give me a kiss, won't you? Just one?"

She stood immobile, neither acquiescing nor denying. She felt safe: it was broad daylight now and she was at her own door. He would not dare to go too far. Her lips shaped themselves receptively. Some women pout their lips and some close them tighter for a kiss. The woman who closes hers is more inclined to take than to give; Molly's were tight.

But she received more than she had anticipated. She was caught in a bear hug that crushed the breath out of her, and Con's mouth was pressed so hard against hers as to bruise her lips against her teeth.

She freed herself with a furious jerk and stood gasping, her fine eyes blazing with indignation. He stepped back alarmed.

"Go away, go right away," she panted. "Don't you ever dare to speak to me again."

She slammed the gate behind her and ran up the path to the house. With his head thrust out, love, jealousy, wrath and hatred boiling madly within him, Con stumped off home.

CHAPTER III

DICK was late for business in the morning, and he had a most beautiful black eye. His mother remarked it ; she had by no means spoken her mind upon that and cognate subjects when he left the house.

The good lady's temper had been tried and she was fretful. Mrs. Poke's little boy had taken a distinct turn for the better, and no one else in the town was in apparent danger of early demise or in need of her ministrations. The lumberjacks had not succeeded in burning the place to ashes, nor had anyone died a violent death. Dick's succinct account of the riot had seemed to her distinctly tame, and normal life had been restored everywhere. Life this morning wore a drab and unexciting aspect to Mrs. Black. Moreover, Dick's best suit had been ruined.

Gateway was admittedly dull on ordinary days. Everybody was at work, the sawmills were running and the agonised screaming of the circular saws came fitfully and faintly down the wind. There were few people on the sidewalk and it was too early for the farmers to be in from the country. A few Indians were loafing near the ferry capstan, but the only real activity was displayed by the usual superfoetation of dogs chasing and romping in the dust of Water Street.

Dick entered a building that bore the sign, " W. Black & Son, General Merchants."

Within it was much like a dozen other stores in town, for

Dick dealt in groceries and hardware and patent medicines and crockery and dry goods. There was a counter on either side and a big sheet-iron stove in the middle of the floor, a few chairs for customers or loafers and a couple of brass spittoons.

The only occupant when Dick entered was Bob White, his clerk. Bob had the reputation of being the best store clerk in Gateway, when sober, and but for that small weakness he could doubtless have owned a store of his own.

He was a short, spare, round-shouldered man, with a pursed-up mouth and expansive ears. His little round head displayed a few lank black hairs carefully brushed over a large central bald spot.

There was no doubt he had taken part in the festivities of the previous day and night, for his eye was fishy and his hands unsteady.

"Not feelin' so good this mornin', Bob?" inquired Dick with a smile.

"Well, that's a fact," admitted Bob solemnly. "Guess I got a touch of dyspepsy, maybe something I eat yesterday didn't go just right."

Dick's eye twinkled, but he nodded gravely. "Well, a little touch of rye is a pretty good thing when you feel that way. If you want to go over to the Imperial I'll mind the store."

Bob's bleary eye brightened. "Perhaps it might do me some good," he mumbled. "Not that I take much of the stuff as a general thing, but when a feller's a little under the weather I've heard it said that a short slug of the hard stuff'll brace him up."

He was edging toward the door as he spoke. Arrived there, he opened it very gently and oozed through. Dick

heaved himself up on the counter and sat idly drumming his heels and thinking of Molly.

The door re-opened to admit a figure peculiarly attired even in that land of strange garments. He seemed to be dressed solely in patches, patches of every shape, material and colour.

The midriff of his bib overalls proclaimed itself as having been once a flour sack, his posterior was manifestly covered by part of a pink gingham dress ; one leg was largely of red and green plaid trimmed with brown duck, and the other had a kneecap of old rose plush that had once upholstered a settee. His shirt was of grey flannel overlaid with various materials. His hat was of straw and wanted most of the brim. His shoes were not mates and broken at that ; and he was unshaven and his hair had not been cut for months.

His manner was as original as his raiment and as varied. It partook of arrogance and servility, of greed and cunning mingled with a childlike trust.

He took three masterful strides into the store, halted, grinned feebly and started to back out, changed his mind and advanced sidelong like a crab.

" Well, good day, good day," he said in a loud rough voice that trailed off into a thin giggle. " Just thought I'd drop in an' say hello. He-he."

" Good day," replied Dick in grave wonder.

" Name's Hokum, Newt Hokum," said the apparition confidentially, " Likely maybe you heard of me some time ? " he leered ingratiatingly.

" No," said Dick slowly.

" No? Well now." He cleared his throat importantly and spat on the floor. Then he looked alarmed and

covered the place with his foot. "I been around Gateway quite a piece," he whimpered.

"Yes, sir," said Dick. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, that's business," said Newt, brightening at once. "That's the way to run a store. I bet there ain't nobody can tell you how to do business right, eh? Well, I guess not."

"Maybe not," agreed Dick, not unaffected by the flattery.

"No, I bet not, I bet not." Coming very close and speaking in a husky whisper. "Well, you bein' a smart live business man, I'd just like to put a little business proposition up to you. I need a few things, just to kind of tide over till harvest, you know. You know how it is with us farmers, a man gets a little short of ready cash along towards harvest time; he maybe needs to run his face a little. Now, I got the finest stand of wheat in the country, you won't see nothin' like it anywheres around. I'll get thirty bushel to the acre sure, likely forty. But that's just where it is, you see, it ain't no good to me till it's cut an' threshed. An' meantime, well, the groceries kind of run out on me. You know the way it is?"

Dick made a wry face. He knew it was a weakness and the bane of all good business, but he was constitutionally incapable of refusing credit to anyone with a hard luck story. He decided he must be firm with Mr. Hokum.

"Haven't you got any butter or eggs to trade in?" he asked gruffly.

Newt shrank into himself and coughed apologetically behind his hand. His weak eyes wandered vacantly about the store.

"Well, no, not ezactly just now, I hain't," he admitted. "You see . . ." He was palpably thinking up a plausible

lie. "You see, sir, my best cow, just come in, givin' sixteen quarts milk a day—got bogged in a muskeg, yes sir, an' we didn't find her for two days—died there. Makes it kind of hard."

Dick listening without open scepticism, he let his imagination soar. "An' two more good milkin' cows strayed—went away down Poplar Valley country, an' time we got 'em rounded up they'd went off milk. So we ain't got no more milk just now than what the baby has to have. An' hens ain't layin' so good, not like they was in spring, an' the coyotes an' skunks that bad you'd hardly believe. So I just thought I'd come in an' kind of try an' run my face. A feller can't let his kids go hungry, you know."

"No," admitted Dick weakly, the idea of children going hungry giving him an uncomfortable and guilty feeling.

"No," said Newt eagerly. "No sir, no sir. It ain't so much what I need, it ain't so much for me, I don't run heavy to grub." And his attenuated body and hollow cheeks seemed to bear out his assertion. "But a man can't let his kids go hungry, now can he?"

Dick began to fear he would be called upon for a donation he knew himself incapable of refusing. It was better to give the thing some colour of a business transaction by calling it a credit sale. He got down from the counter and assumed a sternly business-like air.

"Well, how much credit do you want?" he said briskly.

Newt blinked, coughed behind his hand, and giggled with tears in his eyes.

"Well, say, a couple bags flour, eh? an' a pail of short-enin', an' some sugar an' tea. We got some p'tatoes yet an' the hens lays a egg or two every day. And if it's run to a plug of chewin', eh, would it?"

"Well, yes," agreed Dick. "I guess maybe I could run to that. An' when do you figure to square up?"

"This fall," Hokum assured him earnestly, grinning and at the same time trembling violently. "The very first load of wheat I bring to town, just the minute I get threshed."

Dick sighed. He was reluctant to part with his goods, knowing well that he had only the barest chance of getting paid for them, but he was relieved at the same time by the modesty of the requisition.

He got down a pound of cheap package tea, a ten-pound sack of sugar and small pail of lard. Then he reached into the caddy for a flat black plug of the chewing tobacco most affected in the Canadian West. Newt's eyes glittered feverishly. He reached out a trembling and grimy paw and almost snatched the plug away.

He appeared to have only one sound tooth in his head and that far back on the left side. He gnawed and worried at the plug like a hungry dog with an old bone until he had a piece torn off. Then he gave a deep sigh of beatitude.

"Gosh, that tastes good," he said fervently, forgetting for once to lie. "Ain't had a chew for 'leven days, not since last Toosday week."

Bob White returned. His trip to the Imperial bar had had a good effect on him; his back was straighter, there was a little colour in his grey face and some of the fishiness had gone out of his eyes. His hands no longer shook.

Dick gave him a guilty look. He knew Bob would disapprove, and he had hoped to be rid of the exigent Newt before his return. But there was nothing for it now but to put a good face on it, and, besides, was he not the owner of the store?

He said authoritatively, "Give Mr. Hokum a hand with the stuff, will you, Bob?" and walked with dignity into the little den at the back he called his office.

"Huh," snorted Bob disgustedly, turning his back on Newt, who was struggling with a sack of flour. The poor wretch was so weak from a long course of semi-starvation that the hundred-pound bag was too much for his strength.

Bob watched his struggles with a cold and unfeeling eye for a moment, and then his natural kindliness of heart prevailed. Between them, for Bob's excesses of the previous day had left him in no condition for the handling of heavy weights, they carried out the two sacks and put them in Hokum's wagon'

That equipage was in keeping with its owner, and the team with the vehicle. All the tires were loose and all the wheels dished, the paint had long ago peeled off and the wagon box was dropping to pieces. Hitched to a home-made pole and whiffletrees with patched harness mended with haywire and binder twine were a very small, mangy, spindle-legged mule with drooping ears, and a tall, gaunt, red steer.

Hokum mounted to his seat on a broken board, poked the steer with a pointed stick, yelled shrilly at the mule, and crept slowly off down the street, the wagon creaking and rattling and seeming every moment on the point of falling to pieces.

* * *

Bob sought Dick in the office. "You been lettin' that bum have stuff on tick," he said reproachfully.

"Well, a fellow's gott a take a chance once in a while," parried Dick. "Got to turn over the stock an' keep business movin' some way."

"That won't be hard to do your way," commented Bob drily. "You can always have all that kind of trade you want. Every old deadbeat rooster in the country'll do business with you on them terms. You'll never see a nickel of Newt Hokum's money. He's run that face of his in every store in town, and never paid none of 'em. Your pa chased him out of here a long while ago with a tin can tied to his tail."

"Well, I didn't know that, he handed me a good yarn," Dick defended himself. "Here's another customer, better go an' wait on her."

Bob turned away and Dick sighed with relief.

This time it was a woman, a thin, leathery-faced, tired looking creature. Her rusty black skirt was high in front and revealed elastic-sided boots with broken toes and an inch or two of wrinkled cotton stocking. At the back it trailed on the ground. She wore an old-fashioned tight bodice with sleeves that fitted close from elbow to wrist and puffed out into balloons at the shoulders. A large black straw hat with a dejected feather sat askew on her greying hair, which was screwed up in a tight little knob on the nape of her neck.

She carried a large basket which she heaved up on the counter with an effort, and stopped to pant for breath.

"How-dy-do, Mrs. Gimble," bowed Bob, who knew everyone within twenty miles of Gateway by sight and name. "Won't you set down. Pretty warm, ain't it?"

He hustled out to get her a chair, into which she sank with a grateful murmur. She had been up at five that morning, milking cows and getting breakfast for a large family, and had just ridden twelve miles over a rough bush trail, perched up on a springless wagon on a seat without a back.

" You didn't ought to have drug that heavy basket in here yourself," said Bob in gallant reproach. " I'd 've fetched it."

The tired woman smiled faintly. " I got some butter'n eggs in," she said. " Six dozen fresh eggs an' fifteen pounds butter. What'll you give me ? "

He proceeded to unpack her basket, examining each egg carefully and smelling each pound of butter.

" I'm sorry, Mrs. Gimble," he said regretfully, " but I can't really offer you no more than twelve cents a dozen for the eggs an' fifteen cents for the butter."

The woman sighed. " It's a long way to bring 'em for that much money, but none of the other stores don't offer no more. I guess I tried 'em all."

Bob shook his head. " Honest, Mrs. Gimble, I'd like to give you more, but I can't. But I can tell how you can get more if you like to hear. Lots of ladies gets sore an' won't listen, but I think you got more sense, Mrs. Gimble."

The compliment woke something like animation in the worn face. " Well, mister, if there is any way I could get more for 'em I'd be mighty glad to hear it."

" Would you now ? " cried Bob with enthusiasm. " That's fine, fine. Well, now, Mrs. Gimble, we want to pay the best price for butter an' eggs, but we can't do it unless they're first-class. These eggs, for instance, now, some of 'em's newlaid an' some's a week or more old, some's clean an' some's dirty. You got 'em all mixed in together so a feller can't tell which from t'other. Now, if you was to keep the strictly newlaid eggs apart from the rest, why, we'd be glad to give you fifteen cents a dozen for 'em, all you want to bring, maybe sixteen cents, see ? An up to fifty in winter."

She nodded. "I'll do that, mister, an' what about the butter?"

"We'd be glad to give you twenty cents a pound for the butter if it was best quality, but this ain't worked enough."

"Goodness knows," was the weary reply, "I worked hard enough over it."

"I'm sure you did, Mrs. Gimble, I'm sure you did, but you didn't work it in just the right way. From the look an' the smell I'd say you had your cream too sour for one thing. Then you used a mite too much salt, see, it's workin' out already. An' the last thing, you didn't get the buttermilk out of it, an' that means it won't keep no matter how much salt you put in. You see what I mean?"

"Well, you're the first one ever told me about that," she said. "All the others just said they'd give me so much an' I could take it or leave it."

"We figure to look after our customers right here an' help 'em all we can," he replied sententiously. "When we get the right kind of lady, like yourself, say, Mrs. Gimble, we try to show her how she can make more money. It's good for her an' it's good for our business. We can sell all the real fresh eggs, an' all the first-quality butter we can get, an' so we can give you a good price for 'em. But it's very hard to move low-grade stuff at any price."

Her first fatigue having worn off, and captivated by Bob's frank and friendly manner, the worn little woman sat up in her chair and begged for information. The no less delighted Bob delivered himself of a lucid lecture on egg marketing and butter making.

Dick listened to him from the office with admiration not untinged with envy. He understood why Bob was considered the best store clerk in town, and realized anew how

much he had to learn about the business of keeping store.

Mrs. Gimble, full of gratitude and promises to heed her mentor's admonitions, completed her purchases and left the store, attended to her wagon by Bob with her parcels. He helped her to mount to her seat with respectful gallantry and returned beaming.

"That's the way to handle 'em," he said with a prim smile. "I've had my eye on that little woman for a long time. She's a real hard worker an' she's got sense. She's mostly traded with Jake Long up to now, an' he don't know butter from axle grease an' all henfruit looks alike to him. Now I got her comin' here we'll try an' work up a high-class trade with the hotels. If I had a dozen women with as much brains as her I'd corner the hotel business of the whole blame town. But that's the way with most of these country women, you can't learn 'em a thing. They know it all, an' that's how come we get smell-to-glory butter an' granddaddy eggs."

Dick laughed and went back to his books. It was a task that irked him extremely, but he tackled it conscientiously'

* * *

His father during his lifetime had regarded with supreme contempt the intelligence both of his wife and of his son, and had repressed them both sternly and inflexibly.

Dick had never been allowed any pocket money, and though he had worked in the store at times, some strange jealousy had made his father guard from him as if they were precious secrets all the details of the business. He had never been permitted to wait upon important customers or to know anything of the accounts.

His father, having apparently made up his mind that his

son was useless, seemed best pleased when the boy went fishing or hunting. Dick had seemed well on the way to becoming the idle wastrel his father so often declared him to be.

And then the elder Black, an intemperate man, had indulged himself in one "toot" too many, and an ill-used liver had risen in rebellion. Dick found himself with the business on his hands, and a fretting snarling bedridden father mingling pleas with advice and curses.

The old man had risen from his sickbed to come down to his beloved business and stave off disaster for one day, but the effort had proved too much for his shattered constitution. He lingered a month, settling his affairs, berating his wife and son, and passed away in a mood of profound discouragement.

He had contrived to assure his wife's subsistence during her lifetime, leaving her the house and an income of fifty dollars a month. The store he had left to Dick, with the pessimistic prophecy that he would not keep it long.

He had in measure assured the success of his own prediction by his neglect of the boy's training and by depriving the business of needed capital.

But Dick tackled his task with unexpected energy; for eleven months now he had struggled manfully to learn how to keep the concern going. Until recently he had seemed on the point of winning his battle, the one great drawback being his dependence on Bob White.

The elder Black had maintained a firm grip on the amiable but intemperate Bob, keeping him generally in a state of rigid sobriety. Dick's control was necessarily much weaker, and Bob was proceeding with accelerating speed down the slippery path of the dipsomaniac.

And then Molly McLay had come upon the scene. He had known her, of course, since childhood, and they had gone to the same school, but she had been to him only a pretty girl usually surrounded by boys, and girls in general had interested him much less than forest and river.

But in the magic of the Northern spring, when the imprisoned earth bursts with violence its fetters of ice and snow, and all life revels ecstatically in a suddenly powerful sun, a spell had been laid upon him. He saw Molly in a new light and fell cataclysmically in love. In her he beheld incarnate all the beauty and grace of life ; to worship and serve her was manifestly the true end and purpose of existence ; to win a smile from her an ample reward for all pains.

It did not occur to him that Molly's lazy smile had never been turned in his direction until he became one of the two most eligible young bachelors in Gateway.

A man cannot serve love and mammon. The business suffered, Bob escaped still more from control. The purchase of Bluebird and the rubber-tired buggy took money out of the concern that should have been left there.

Working at his books or serving customers through the day, suffering from a slight headache and the let-down feeling consequent on his strenuous activities of the night before, Dick was conscience-stricken and discouraged.

He scanned his list of debtors. He had a number of accounts due from farmers, but they would not be paid until after harvest. He could not conceal from himself that on the list were names that should not be there, particularly Newt Hokum's. He registered a mental vow that no more deadbeats should run their impecunious faces at his store.

The town accounts were in better shape, but even here he had to accuse himself of undue leniency in giving credit. His resolution to overcome that weakness grew sterner.

Next he examined his own indebtedness and his mouth twisted wryly. There were some large bills coming due, which the money he had paid for Bluebird would have met, and on which he would now have to ask for an extension. A glance at his bank passbook did nothing to raise his spirits; his balance was uncomfortably low.

But into the pit of gloom in which he sat brooding there slid a dazzling ray of sunshine. Molly called up on the telephone to say that she would be glad to be taken for a drive that evening.

A flood of happiness and optimism washed over his soul. Molly wanted him: the purchase of Bluebird had been justified a thousandfold: all would yet be well. He put away his discouraging books, let Bob go home, and closed up the store for the night.

* * *

The sun was setting and the heat of the day was past. Mosquitoes, that northern pest, were scarce that year and caused no annoyance. The air was heavy with the languorous scent of the wolf willow, and a few wild roses were still in bloom. A great peace lay upon the landscape, a silence broken only by the distant chime of cowbells, and the occasional hollow boom of a night-hawk as he stooped to a moth.

Dick was blissfully happy. It was not in Molly's nature to taste bliss, but she was indolently content. Bluebird tossed her dainty head and fought with her bit, and her sharp little hoofs spurned the ground.

The silence and beauty of the scene were shattered by a

singular and unpleasant noise, followed shortly by a disquieting apparition and an even more singular and unpleasant stench.

It began as a faint put-put-put-put, like an asthmatic horse coughing in the next field. Bluebird pricked up her ears and her nostrils twitched.

"Wonder what the deuce that is?" said Dick.

Molly was incurious and unexcited. "Know pretty soon," she murmured.

There rounded a bend in the winding trail a curious little vehicle painted a brilliant red, with large and shiny brass fittings. What made it even more unique in the annals of Gateway was that, though it approached at a full twelve miles an hour, it was propelled by no visible agency. Each noisy cough it gave jerked it violently forward.

Seated upon it and guiding it by means of a long lever was Gateway's best known medicine man, Dr. Gabriel Thoms. He looked like a Bacchus enthroned, a Bacchus run to seed and long grey whiskers. The whiskers framed a broad red face resting upon broad shoulders, and below the shoulders a great paunch encased in a white waistcoat. The doctor occupied the entire vehicle, the first automobile ever seen in Gateway, taking its first trial spin. He was proud and happy and he smiled.

But to one of his beholders his whole appearance was an outrage. Bluebird snorted loudly and hopped sidewise off the trail. The buggy gave a jerk, and Molly only saved herself from going overboard by clinging to Dick, who was himself hanging hard on the reins.

The doctor should have stopped his engine, he elected instead to blow his horn. The raucous hoot convinced Bluebird that the occasion demanded action. She reared

up with her forefeet in the air, came down and lashed out with her heels, and then took the bit in her teeth and bolted.

She went off at a tangent, all but upsetting the buggy, and before Dick had time to brace himself, was heading for a thick clump of poplars at a gallop. The buggy bounced behind her on the rough prairie sod like a rubber ball.

Molly's beauty lacked one attribute of perfection. The golden aureole that crowned her white brow was genuine, what there was of it, but its seeming luxuriance was due to a switch. Her high-piled pompadour was also filled out with two rats, those hideous, sausage-shaped rolls of false hair worn by women in those days.

Perched on the pompadour was a large hat, very high in front, and the resistance offered to the wind by this erection was such that it could not be worn at all in a breeze. The speed at which the frightened Bluebird was going and the violent lurching and careening of the buggy was sufficient. Molly felt her hat going and screamed. She let go with one hand and made an ineffectual snatch at it as it sailed away.

Dick, tugging with all his might, turned Bluebird from the poplar bluff, but could not stop her until she had run herself out.

"Now, whoa, you little fool," he panted, and turned to look at Molly. "How are you, Moll? Uh!"

The gasp was caused by the sight of the stringy yellow locks that barely reached to her shoulders.

"Don't you dare stare at me, Dick Black," she snapped. "Look the other way. It's all your fault, you ought to be drivin' oxen. If I couldn't drive a horse any better than that I'd get a wheelbarrow."

"Oh, but say, Moll."

"Don't talk to me. Turn that horse around if you can, if you can't, get out and lead her, an' find my hat for me. I bet it's ruined. This is the last time I go ridin' with you until you learn how to drive."

Appalled by the unsuspected venom of her tongue, he turned the mare in silence and drove slowly back.

"I hope to goodness we don't meet anybody," said Molly anxiously, "I wouldn't have anyone see me this way for the world. Where's that dirty thing that scared the horse?"

But the doctor had observed from afar that they were safe, and so put-putted merrily on his way into town, where he paraded proudly up Water Street, causing a major sensation and at least three more runaways.

Dick and Molly, driving slowly back in search of the hat, encountered something far worse. There rode out of the sunset a slender female figure on a small pony, waving aloft something that glistened like gold. No Indian brave ever displayed his gory trophy with more glee, for the girl was Golden, and she bore in very deed the scalplock of her whom she chose to regard as her deadliest enemy.

"Hello, Molly, hello," she hailed. "I just found this roostin' in a rosebush. Is it yours?"

Molly's face was crimson. Dick looked at the ground, he was embarrassed, furiously angry with Golden, and at the same time he wanted to laugh.

But Molly met blade with blade. "Oh, thanks, Golden. Yes, that's mine. It's lucky you ride around alone so much, we mightn't have found it at all with it comin' on dark."

She held out her hands for the hat and the shining strands of hair.

"That's a dandy switch," said Golden spitefully. "Guess I might have found a rat or two as well, but likely they run in their holes when they saw me comin'. Any-way you can easy get lots more."

Molly smiled, though Dick could feel her tremble beside him. He had lost his desire to laugh, feeling that inward tremor that seizes a man in the presence of the malignant sex at war.

Golden swung her pony's head with a mocking laugh, and went off at a canter.

"The cat," said Molly in a shaking voice, "she'll tell it all over the town. I'd sooner have had anybody else see me."

She turned viciously on Dick. "It's all your fault. Let's go home before you do anything else foolish, I'm scared to be out with a fellow like you."

They drove home in silence, arriving in the kindly dusk that concealed Molly's comparative hairlessness.

Dick felt he had been hardly used. He said to himself that it was not his fault if Molly bought her hair, or if Dr. Thoms chose to frighten high-strung horses into equine hysterics with a devil wagon.

Molly, for her part, began to fear that she had gone too far. Instinct told her that even the most devoted suitor will not bear more than a certain amount of ill-usage, and she had no mind to lose Dick.

She touched his arm gently. "I'm sorry, Dickie," she said in a soft voice. "It was all that hateful girl and that miserable old doctor, I don't really blame you a particle."

"Why, sho, that's all right, Moll," he replied, instantly placated. "I understand, it was enough to make any girl mad."

She was so sweet to him that he left her more devotedly her slave than ever. As for poor Golden, he detested the spiteful little vixen, and he was resolved to steer clear of her for the future.

CHAPTER IV

THE "Prairie Belle" lay at the wharf in the river with steam up. She was a long, broad, flat-bottomed stern-wheeler, with a little white pilot house perched high up before her tall smokestack, and she had plied on the Sweet-water for years. She was about to take an excursion party up the river to Poplar Island, where they would land and picnic, returning after dark, while they danced on the broad deck to the music of the Gateway brass band.

It was a social function of the first order, and all the fashionable world were there in force. They came down the bank in little groups, the men in their Sunday clothes and the women in cool summer dresses, a foam of frilly white petticoats and sunshades.

Dick brought Molly. Conquest Gates had yielded sulkily to persuasion and brought his sisters, Golden and Pearly.

Dick's sun was shining brightly in these days, for Con was still in disgrace, Molly had been very kind of late, and no other serious rival was in sight.

"All aboard," bellowed the captain from the pilot house, and the whistle blew two short blasts.

The warps were cast off, steam shot from the escapes, the big walking beam began to walk and the stern wheel to churn the water into foam. The town band, seven pieces

of brass, two of wood, a kettledrum and a bass drum, struck up a lively march.

There came a despairing yell from the shore, a globular figure on stiltlike legs panted down to the wharf, poised himself with flapping arms on the stringpiece, leaped and landed flat on his stomach on the deck of the "Prairie Belle."

It was Pop Slingsby. He was unshaven and there were grimy smears across his face. Cobwebs garnished his bald head and his clothes were covered with earthy stains. He exhaled a mildewy smell.

They assisted him to rise and asked him how he came to be there.

"Boys," he explained in a high voice. "I just had to come. Ain't never missed a excursion or a picnic in my life. Maw she had me down cellar so I couldn't get away. But she couldn't hold me, no sir, I clumb out the wood hole. Onct I got stuck an' it looked like I was there to stay; but I wiggled, I wiggled like a fishworm, an' here I am. Hide me, boys, quick, if Maw misses me my name's mud."

They rammed him into the narrow space between the boiler and a pile of cordwood. Not a second too soon, for there appeared on the river bank a giantess in a flowing dress of crimson print, her head bound up in a yellow turban.

"Corne-elius," she cried in a voice that resembled the lowing of a cow. "O you Corne-e-elius."

Cornelius replied not, instead the band burst forth in a brazen blare of defiance and the big drummer surpassed himself. The "Prairie Belle" drew out into midstream, leaving the forsaken wife to voice her complaints to whomsoever would listen.

Pop emerged cautiously from his hiding place.

"Phew," he puffed, "if it's any hotter where I'm goin' I'm agoin' to reform right now an' lead a good life. I sweat off forty pounds of pure lard in alongside that old boiler."

A considerable group of men surrounded him; the ladies were not present, not that they would not have liked to be, but his wit was Falstaffian and his sallies spared no one.

An intensely social old man, his popularity was wide, and an appreciative audience was his greatest joy in life. His ostensible profession of insurance agent allowed him to pervade the town at will, and though he sold very little insurance, he knew everybody. His marital infelicities with the giant wife who fed him and petted him and bullied him provided him with an inexhaustible topic and a perennial audience.

"What's Maw been doin' to you now, Pop?" they inquired of him.

"Put me down cellar so I couldn't come on this excursion, that's what. Down in that black hole—trapdoor piled up with stovewood—couldn't get out. That's what she thought. Who? Me? Is my name Cornelius G. Slingsby or ain't it? I had my jack knife, see. Here she is. I whittles me a hole in the door of the wood chute, lifts up the catch an' away. Can't keep me away from no steam-boat excursions."

"Tell that to the marines, Pop," encouraged the delighted Cracker, grinning all over.

It being remittance time, Cracker had treated his friend to the excursion, but while the stately colonel remained aloof, proffering old-fashioned gallantries to the ladies,

Cracker, with the taste for low company natural in an aristocrat by birth, had immediately joined himself to the audience around Pop.

"All right, all right, all right, wait till you're married," retorted Pop to his scepticism. "You're a bachelor an' no single man knows what trouble is. Jail's bad an' hangin's worse but hanging's over quicker'n marriage. If they was to offer me a rope or a woman another time, I'd say to 'em, I'd say, 'Just wait till I get my collar off an' you can put the rope around my neck.' Wait till you're married, young feller, an' my sad words'll come back to you often an' often."

"But why do you stay with her, Pop? If I'd a wife like that I'd cut my stick and do a bally bunk."

"Yes, yes, yes, you talk. Easy talkin', you ain't married. I been married three times—seem to have the habit—always been awful unlucky all my life. All my wives was pecooliar, but, you believe me, Maw's the pecooliarest old bird of 'em all. She a only oner, she is. Well, look at what she done."

"What's that?" encouraged Cracker. "Spit it out, old man."

"Why, ain't I just been tellin' you? Keepin' me down cellar for two days, feedin' me through a knothole in the floor. Ain't that a nice way for a wife to use her man? Just because I swiped a couple dollars of hers she didn't need. An' look what she done Dominion Day, just because I went up town to look around an' somebody give me a drink or two. Not bein' used to it, I got, you might say, a little overlook."

"Yes, go on," urged Cracker, as the old man paused and chuckled.

"Well, bein' a little tired an' dizzy when I got home, I lays down on the floor till it wears off. What'd she do? Was she kind to me? Nix, she took an' nailed my sleeves an' my pant legs to the floor an' buttoned up my coat. Left me there all night too. I was asleep an' didn't notice what she was up to, but when I woke up, my gosh, O my good gosh, I thought I was paralysed.

"I let's a whoop out of me an' in she comes. 'A coolin' drink is what you need,' she says an' away she goes for a pail of water. Now, that was damn cold water. I know. Every time I'd open my mouth to holler she pours a gallon or two down my neck. She'd like to drown me. I was that full of water in a little while it sloshed around inside of me like a tank for two days after."

He paused to let the laughter subside, his head cocked and his eyes glistening.

"Look what she done last fall," he went on. "Some religious nut went an' prophesied the end of the world, an' Maw took it bad. The night it was to come off she puts her nightshirt on over her clothes an' goes an' roosts on the back fence, an' it rainin' to beat the devil. I couldn't get her to come in no way. She said the rain didn't matter, the day of glory was at hand an' she'd soon be dry an' warm an' all her troubles over. She said there was a golden hack acomin' for her special."

He paused with the cunning of a born story teller.

"Well, go on, go on," prompted an impatient listener.

"Oh, I shifted her. I went down cellar an' set a trap an' caught me a mouse—cellar's lousy with 'em. Out I goes, holdin' mister mouse up by the tail, an' tells her it was goin' down her back. Maw ain't scared of ary other thing on earth, but she despises mice. She off of her perch,

screechin' like six cats afightin', an' into the house. When I come in after her, she was up on the table with the butcher knife in one hand an' holdin' up her skirts with the other above her knees. She's says if I don't take that mouse out of there right off she'll have my heart out with the butcher knife. An' after that she come quiet to bed."

"Ghastly thing to have a wife like that," said Cracker with a provocative shake of the head.

Pop's innate perversity at once prompted him to take the other side.

"Don't you believe it, she's all right. When me an' her's on good terms she's the best woman what ever lived. An' cook, say, she can take Noah's original genuine rooster what he had in the Ark, an' fix it so you'd think it was spring chicken, an' there ain't no blueberry pies like what she makes in heaven, nor there won't be till she gets there."

* * *

But Pop had not escaped from his redoubtable mate as easily as he imagined. The river was still high and the current strong; the clumsy steamer made slow headway, and a wide bend in the river above the town made it possible for an active and determined woman to cut across the chord of the arc and head her off. Maw Slingsby was both active and determined for all her bulk.

As the "Priarie Belle" rounded into the upper reach, a skiff was observed to shoot out from the bank and bear down upon her.

"Begad, if that don't look like Maw's red dress," said a man.

"An' if that ain't the yellow rag she wears on her head, call me a Dutchman," supplemented another.

"O Pop, here she comes, loaded for bear," was the warning cry.

"Buffalo chips," jeered Pop. "Can't fool this old man."

But down the river there floated a cowlike low, "O you Corne-elius."

He rose in a panic and bolted across the deck. Here his wayward feet caught in some obstruction. He sprawled forward, struck the low rail just below the point of balance, his heels flew up, and he dived overboard with a strangled cry and a heavy splash.

"Man overbo-oard," vociferated Cracker, and the bull-voiced Colonel Long on the upper deck echoed the cry. Everybody shouted.

The engine bell clanged, the captain swung the boat's head to avoid hitting the struggling man with the stern-wheel. With her engines stopped and steam roaring from her escapes, the "Prairie Belle" swung broadside on to the current and began to drift.

Pop came to the surface, flailing the water with ineffectual arms. Some one hurled the "Prairie Belle's" one life-belt at him. It had hung outside in sun and wind for many years, and fortunately fell to pieces on striking him. But the force of the blow was sufficient to drive him under.

The steamboats' skiff was towing astern at the end of a long painter. Eager hands hauled her alongside, and all the men on board seemed bent on getting into her at once, causing the utmost confusion and delay. Meanwhile Pop was steadily drowning.

At this moment, Con, who had abandoned his sisters and was sulking by himself in the stern, suddenly flung off his coat and dived in. He was a strong swimmer and he reached Pop just as the old man was going down for the third time.

The skiff, loaded to the gunwales with rescuers, now cast off and came scrambling along with her oars beating spasmodically.

But the boat propelled by Maw with more than masculine vigour, passed her like a flash and rounded to beside Con, struggling hard to keep the inert Pop's head above water. Maw knelt in the stern and passed her powerful hands under the arms of her erring spouse. With an effort that almost sank the boat she hauled him in board and laid him face downward across athwart.

Of Con, of the other skiff, of the steamboat, she took no notice whatever, but swiftly resumed her oars and headed at full speed for the shore. Cheers and laughter followed her from the "Prairie Belle."

* * *

All that remained was to pick up Con, but the boat was so overloaded that he could not be taken aboard. It almost seemed that he would have to swim ashore, but a rope was passed to him, and he was eventually towed safely back to the steamboat.

And Molly was the first person to welcome and congratulate him.

"Good for you, Con," she cried enthusiastically. "You're a hero," and offered him her hand.

He took it with a grin and an exultant glance at Dick. For a few moments he came closer to being really popular than he had ever been in his life. Everybody shook hands with him and thumped him on the back and told him what a fine fellow he was. Then he was led away to get some dry clothes, but Molly was waiting for him when he came out again.

Dick found himself cast into outer darkness. It was not

his fault ; he had been forward on the upper deck when Pop went overboard, and had hardly become aware of what was going on, so deep was his absorption in Molly, until the skiff had already put out to the rescue.

He felt a strong inclination to punch Con, hero or not. The man was a public nuisance. He himself could have rescued Pop just as easily if he had happened to be on hand when the old fool went overboard.

But Molly, instinctively following the spotlight, and glad of an excuse to make up again with Con, for she had no mind to part finally with any suitor, was taking no notice of anyone else. It was not etiquette for a girl to ignore her escort, but the imperious Molly flouted conventions at whim, and she knew Dick was thoroughly tamed and would come back whenever she chose to whistle.

Dick stalked moodily away to seek consolation from Jessie Jenifree. But Jessie already had a cavalier, and her sense of propriety was too strong to permit of her allowing anyone else to monopolize her. She was pleasant to Dick, but the least bit distant, and Billy Moss, who had been at the expense of bringing her on the excursion, refused somewhat pointedly to be eliminated.

Feeling more ill-used than ever, Dick sought a solitary bench aft beside the paddle box, where he might nurse his grievance unmolested.

He stared unseeingly at the high green banks of the river, patched with woods and fields of ripening grain, all mirrored waveringly in the rippling waters of the broad stream, but there was no beauty or joy for him in that golden afternoon.

Suddenly he was aware that he had company. Golden Gates was standing looking down at him with her crooked

smile, and Pearly was just behind her, looking shy but friendly. The frown on his brow deepened. Had this spiteful creature again come to exult in his discomfiture?

But Golden had learnt a lesson.

"Well, Dick, what do you suppose Maw Slingsby's doin' to poor old Pop?" she queried.

In spite of his gloom a smile twitched Dick's lips. "Likely she's leadin' him through town with a ring in his nose," he suggested.

"Unless she cuts her a gad and chases him home," she countered.

Without quite knowing how it came about, he found himself in amicable converse with the sisters. He was in the mood for Golden's acrid wit; it amused him that afternoon to have his fellow voyagers held up to merciless ridicule.

"If I had a pile of money, do you know one thing I'd do with it?" she commented as a highly adorned lady, no longer young, strolled past.

"I'll bite, Golden, what would you do?"

"I'd buy poor Mrs. Pink a new face; she's had her old one so long that even paint don't help it any more."

She made fun of the majestic Colonel Long, now retailing stories of steamboat days on the Mississippi "before the war." As the Colonel had been an infant in arms at the time of the American civil war, these stories were open to question, but the people of Gateway were not well read in history, and they were in the habit of accepting highly coloured tales with genial tolerance. The Colonel had a small but attentive audience of elderly women.

There was only one person she spared, though how she ached to speed one of her venomous shafts at Molly. She had the conversation virtually in her own hands, for

Dick confined himself, as it were, to holding up objects for her to shoot at.

But though he gave her his ear, his eyes rested with greater contentment on Pearly. The sisters were very much alike and yet so different. Where Golden's movements were angular and abrupt, hers were swift and supple. Where all Golden's features were sharp to exaggeration, hers were firmly but delicately modelled. Her mouth had a slight upward curve at the corners and her upper lip was rather full. Her manner was reserved and shy without being sullen.

She said very little, sometimes giving a quiet little laugh at a quip of her sister's. But she flushed painfully once or twice when Golden permitted herself to overstep the rather wide limits the West allowed in the matter of outspokenness.

With the band blaring at intervals, and the people moving about in little groups, talking, laughing, flirting, the steamboat coughed her way up the Sweetwater until she ran in under a low cutbank on Poplar Island and tied up.

Fires were lit on the shore and picnic baskets unpacked. Molly continued shamelessly to let Con monopolize her, and Dick had to be content with the sisters. He felt a jealous pang when he looked at his rival, but found Golden and Pearly surprisingly tolerable. Pearly thawed gradually and he discovered himself listening for her laugh, which was not the shrill parrot scream so many women affect, but a soft rippling noise. Their eyes met more than once, and he liked the downward sweep of her long lashes and the slow colour that mantled her cheeks at each encounter.

In the day of his humiliation it was delightfully soothing

to his vanity to find some other visibly affected by his presence, even if it were only a young girl fresh from school. It made him think better of himself and almost inclined to be defiant of Molly.

The company ate and frolicked about, and couples strayed away among the columnar trunks of the black poplars, amid thickets of willow and alder and highbush cranberry and choke cherry.

The sun set in imperial pomp. The band struck up a waltz and dancers began to revolve on the well lit deck. The whistle blew short blasts, calling in stragglers. Couples began to emerge from the bush, the last pair, very self-conscious and the centre of some not wholly refined badinage, clambered breathlessly aboard just as the gangplank was hauled in.

With just steerage way on her, the "Prairie Belle" turned her blunt nose homeward and drifted down with the current.

"Say, Moll," inquired Dick, "do I get any of your company at all on this trip?"

"Don't be so mean, Dickie," she pleaded. "You ran away from me when I went to say a few words to Con. I'm going to be jealous of Golden."

"Oh, you're smart," he answered with a placable laugh. "You'll put a man in the wrong every time."

* * *

It was nearing midnight when the steamboat tied up at the wharf, and the people began to flock ashore.

As they set foot on the wharf a deep voice was heard saying, "Where's dhat man pull my no 'count husband out of water?"

They shouted for Con.

" Well, here I am," he answered. " What about it ? "

As a school of herring is scattered by a whale, the crowd was cleft by the towering figure of a woman in a crimson dress and a yellow turban.

" You dhe man ? " she inquired, and bent her dark gaze on Con.

Her face was very swarthy, yet neither negroid nor mongoloid. Her features were craggy and huge, her face deeply lined, and her large eyes blazed in deep caverns. She was some inches over six feet in height and of massive build.

Con looked up at her sulkily, he disliked tall women who could look down on him. He grunted an assent.

" You are," she said, speaking slowly but with very distinct articulation though in a peculiar accent. " Dhen I am oblige to you. Cornelius is pretty near to be useless—he has no sense— but I have a feel for him. So I deems it of you, yes sir, I deems it."

" It's all right," said Con gruffly. " Nothin' to make a fuss about."

" I make no fuss," she replied, drawing herself up to her full, awe-inspiring height. " But I deems it and one day I pay you."

She fixed an extraordinarily piercing gaze on him, and repeated significantly, " One day I pay you. You are man who will have many troubles, you make trouble for yourself and for many odher. I see in your eye a day of bad trouble. When dhat day come, when your trouble hit you, you come to me, I help you dhen."

As if the matter had been finally disposed of, she turned abruptly away.

Some one in the crowd shouted, " Say, Maw, how's the

old man? What'd you do to him?"

She gave a deep short laugh. "Pop get more water in him dhis day dhan for long time past. He don' like de water much for drink. I get him empty out and dry him off and put him in his bed like bad child. When he is better he is gone down cellar two tree day learn him be good."

She addressed herself to the steep bank and with a few tremendous strides was gone into the darkness.

* * *

Con Gates had been received back into favour, and Dick's short-lived reign as favoured suitor was over. But he persevered, in fact, he had no longer any thought for anything but Molly. He could not keep his mind on his business, and virtually turned over the management of the store to Bob White, trusting, when he could bring himself to think of the matter at all, that in some vague way all would come right in the fall.

He told himself that once he had Molly's final consent, he would be at liberty to devote most of his time to the business and so make up any ground he had lost.

Bluebird and the rubber-tired buggy was still his trump card. Molly had come to take it for granted that he was to take her for a drive every fine afternoon. Otherwise he did not prosper greatly with his wooing. One day she would be in a pliant and melting mood and would encourage him to hope that all would be well in the end. She pleaded only for a little time. She was not yet ready to get married, she said; she wanted to enjoy life and freedom a little longer.

And on the next day, perhaps, she would be hard and cold, and nothing he could say or do would please her. All

his hopes would be dashed, and he would return home raging or in despair.

Then the determined and resourceful Con played a higher card. He appeared on Water Street in an automobile, a stupendous vehicle, larger and noisier and smellier than Dr. Thoms'. Whereas the doctor's merely coughed, "put-put-put-put," Con's barked, "put-put, put-put, put-put," for it had two cylinders and the doctor's had only one.

Molly was charmed with it. She shot by Dick one day with a smile and nod, Con grinning derisively by her side, leaving Bluebird to prance indignantly in a fog of dust and gasoline fumes. After that, Con's auto was as often seen at her door as Dick's buggy.

He had wild thoughts of selling the mare and getting a car too, but he found that he simply could not raise the money and stay in business, and it was apparent even to his infatuation that a bankrupt would not find much favour with Molly.

It had, however, one good effect, for it gave him more leisure to look into his affairs. He was appalled to see how far he had slipped back even in the few weeks he had let things slide. Bob had been drunk and incapable several times and his condition had driven away a lot of custom. In that state he had also allowed credit to sundry doubtful characters.

Dick could not bring himself to dismiss the unfortunate man, but he did take a firmer grip on him, and matters began to mend a little.

Harvest arrived, the whirr of the binder was heard in the fields, followed by the feverish rattle of the threshing machines. Farmers began to make their appearance in

town with loads of new wheat.

This was the season when Dick, in common with other storekeepers, expected to gather in his outstanding accounts, and when the wholesale houses became most pressing in their demands for settlement.

But the harvest was short that year and prices low. Accounts were lamentably slow in coming in. Many of Dick's debtors were plainly giving the store a wide berth. But he was astonished one day by the sight of Newt Hokum sidling in.

Bob White was away at lunch, a fact the wary Newt had taken care to assure himself of. He came in grinning and twisting his lean shoulders, broke off to cough apologetically, and then cast his eyes dejectedly on the floor and sighed deeply.

"Well, Newt, come in to square up with me?" asked Dick with hollow joviality.

"Awful bad year," groaned Newt dismally. "Worst season I ever heard tell of. Never see such a bum harvest."

"Why, it's not so bad," said Dick. "They tell me there was some bumper yields out your way."

"For the lucky ones, yes sir, for the lucky ones," whined Newt. "But I don't never have no luck. Never see the beat of it."

"Didn't your crop turn out any good?"

"Man I tell you," cried Newt passionately, "I won't have seed for next spring. Not off of that crop, I won't. An' the kids without a rag an' my woman sick. My Gawd, O my Gawd, it's awful. No feed for the cattle—spuds froze."

"There's been no hard frost yet," interrupted Dick.

"Not around here maybe, but out my way aplenty.

Every dern thing froze, every dern thing. An' I lost another cow in the muskeg."

"Why don't you put up a fence?"

"I would if I had the money, Mr. Black. Can't seem to get ahold of a nickel no place. An' the coyotes got all my chickens. No sir, I don't know what my kids is agoin' to eat next winter."

Dick looked at the lank, limp, snuffling figure with a mixture of pity and disgust. Newt gave a curious wriggle all over, sought to catch his eye and immediately averted his own, and said in a loud harsh voice.

"Well, there she is, that's what I'm up against. I got to have grub for my kids, I just got to." He banged one fist in the palm of the other. "Yes sir, can't get it one place I got to get it another. It's a business proposition I'm makin'. I'll square you up—I ain't tryin' to beat nobody."

His eloquence suddenly faltered. He gave two or three big gulps. "Say," he inquired in a very thin meek voice, "couldn't a feller stand you off for a sack of flour?"

"A forty-eight pound sack," said Dick sternly. "That'll be the very best I can do."

"Yes, yes, that'll do fine," said Newt hurriedly, and was taken with another of his trembling fits. "You're a good-hearted man, Mr. Black."

"I'm a damn fool," said Dick. "Don't come back in here again till you're ready to square up."

"No, no, I won't, Mr. Black, an' thank you. But say, Mr. Black, say, would it run to—you know? Ain't had a chew of tobacco since two weeks yestiddy."

Dick turned away to hide a grin, took a plug out of the

caddy and handed it to him. "Now beat it quick," he said gruffly.

"Thanks, Mr. Black, thanks, I'll never forget you. You see, I'll square up. Good day, sir, good day."

He shambled quickly out of the store with the flour on his shoulder and the precious tobacco clutched tightly in his hand.

* * *

Izzy Isenberg had been in Gateway since the spring, the first of his race to open a store in the town. With no race prejudice to overcome he had prospered from the first. This was due in large measure to his revolutionary methods of conducting a business.

The Gateway commercial tradition was casual and social. Customers were personal friends of the proprietor, and were in the habit of whiling away long hours in general conversation upon his premises. The latest comer was welcome to a chair by the stove or a seat on the counter and a share in any discussion that might be going on.

When the point in hand had been threshed out to the general satisfaction, the proprietor would rise and wait on him. There was plenty of time. If he were impatient, or wanted something not in stock, or was too fussy in making his choice, he might be invited to try his luck elsewhere.

But it appeared that the revolutionary Izzy was in business to sell things. He was bustling and talkative, a genial and laughter-loving little man, but he conversed with a vigilant eye on the door.

The speaker might be calling down curses on the Government at Ottawa—as the people of the West have had bitter cause to do any time these fifty years—let a customer enter

and Izzy would rise at once and trot off to wait upon him.

He heretically abandoned an article of faith held by all Gateway merchants, which was that the customer was always in the wrong, and he never lost his temper with the most unreasonable female purchaser.

Also he cut prices. The storekeepers of the older faith considered held themselves entitled to a fifty per cent gross profit. There was some excuse for this : they dealt in long credits and their percentage of bad debts was high. But Izzy preferred to deal for cash or trade, and he was very reluctant to extend credit to anyone.

The deadbeats and many of his competitors presently united in cursing his name, but the women of Gateway speedily learned that when they had money to spend they could get better service and better prices at Izzy Isenberg's. He would match a spool of silk or a piece of dress goods with unwearied patience.

It was related of old Hiram Jay that he had told the widow Walker that he didn't give a damn whether she wanted red or green, all he had was blue.

But the modern world was overtaking the sleepy little town, hardly as yet emerged from the status of a trading post for Indians. Izzy happened to be merely the herald of the new order.

He was soon busy enough to employ a hawk-nosed, frizzy-haired nephew of his known as Mose, and a plump, petite, liquid-eyed young sister-in-law, Leah Weinberg. He inaugurated Gateway's first delivery service and advertised extravagantly in the Weekly Gazette.

Every merchant in town soon felt the pressure. Old slipshod methods had to be given up, stocks brought up-to-date, prices lowered, and customers promptly waited

on. Older men, who had saved a competence, talked of retiring.

Dick was hard hit ; Izzy's store was just two doors away, and it seemed to him that all the good customers went in there, while all the deadbeats came to him.

He worked hard, but felt himself in need of sympathy. He had never made a confidant of his mother, whose own unending monologue occupied most of her time and thoughts. She always became fretful and unhappy if forced to listen to anyone else talk.

He could not carry his woes to Molly, who did not care for people who were unfortunate. But Jessie Jenifree was willing to listen and to sympathize. He got rather into the habit of dropping in to see her when Con had pre-empted Molly for the evening.

In moments of depression he sometimes caught himself wishing that Molly had Jessie's warmth of sympathy and understanding, or even that Jessie had some of Molly's beauty. But he dismissed these disloyal fancies quickly. Molly was Molly, incomparable and perfect. He liked Jessie very well, no one better, but his pulses did not quicken a single beat at sight of her. And there the matter rested.

But his creditors did not rest. Driven to desperation by continual duns, he put Bluebird to some real use and drove about the country trying to collect what was due him. But the splendour of his equipage militated against his success no less than did his dislike of acting the part of a ruthless creditor.

One day he drove into a farmyard and encountered an unshaven man in patched and ragged overalls.

The man put his hands on his hips and a grim and bitter

expression clouded his face. He waved his hand to indicate his log house with its sod roof sprouting a tall crop of pigweed, the decaying log barns and corral, the sagging fences, and lastly four small, ragged, bare-legged, dirty-faced children, who stood in a row and stared intently at Dick.

"I don't drive no buggy horse, mister," said the man, "nor no slick buggy. I'll square up with you when I can. You can sue me, but the implement sharks has my bones picked pretty clean."

And that, in essentials, was his experience with most of his debtors.

* * *

He encountered Izzy Isenberg on the street one morning. "Vell, how's de boy?" inquired his competitor with a cheery grin.

"Fine," muttered Dick stiffly, and would have passed on.

But Izzy fell into step beside him, waddling along on his flat feet and discoursing amiably and shrewdly on things in general. He halted at the building which divided his own store from Dick's. The place, belonging to a defunct Indian trader, had been bought by the elder Black with the intention of expanding his floor space, but his death had put an end to the project. Dick had not had the capital to put it to use, and it had been standing empty for some time.

"Vy don't you make use of dat building?" asked Izzy. "You pay taxuses on it, hey? But it brings you in nutting. Dere is no money in dot. Vot?"

"Why don't you buy it off me?" suggested Dick with a grin.

"Vell, I vould too," answered Izzy seriously, "only I t'ink you vant too much maybe. Business is not so good by me I buy a big shtore yet. Some day maybe. Vell, vell, I must be moofin' along, Mose vill vonder where I haf vent."

He waddled off, but the seed he had planted had fallen in fertile ground. It had never occurred to Dick that he might sell the vacant building. Real estate did not change hands very often in Gateway in those days: the dulcet and deceiving voice of the boomster had yet to be heard on the banks of the Sweetwater.

Dick brooded on it for three days, while Izzy waited with the invincible patience of his race. Then there came a letter from a firm of jobbers threatening legal proceedings if their account was not met.

Dick entered Izzy's store for the first time. Isenberg betrayed no exultation, instead he cordially invited his glowering and embarrassed competitor into his private office.

"Say, do you really want to buy that building?" blurted Dick.

Izzy winced, such simple and unguarded speech hurt his feelings. He enjoyed a hard fought bargain, a battle of keen wits, but this was too much like robbing a child. He had his own sense of honour.

"Vot builting?" he parried to give Dick a chance to pull himself together.

But Dick had no commercial subtlety. "You know, the one between us," he replied. "You were talking about it the other day. It's for sale if you want it."

Instinct was too much for Izzy. "Vell, I don't know," he replied cautiously, "business is not so goot, an' I haf

not much money. Money is hardt to get dese days. Vat you vant for it, hey? "

" I was thinking about two thousand," said Dick. " It's worth that, ain't it? "

Izzy hunched his shoulders and spread his hands deprecatingly. " I am very sorry, very sorry, but I cannot pay so much. I vill keep on in my own liddle shtore for now."

" Well, how much will you give me? "

" I don't know—I haf not figured—I don't vant der bremlises very much. I figure up an' let you know later."

" But I want the money now," blurted Dick desperately.

An expression of physical pain passed over Izzy's face. This was like shooting barnyard fowl, it hurt his sporting instincts. He was not really a grasping man, though he enjoyed driving a shrewd bargain.

" I don't know, I don't know," he mused, rubbing his chin in an embarrassed way. " I don't know can I find de money, but maybe if I can I gif you . . ." A sudden cough impeded his utterance.

" Well? "

Sweat started out on Isenberg's brow : he was torn between inherited instinct and tradition and natural kindness and chivalry. He deeply regretted that this was no foeman worthy of his steel. As most men do, he compromised.

" I give you fifteen hundret, five hundret dollars down an' de balance at six and twelf mont's."

" Can't you do any better that that? " queried Dick, trying hard to be businesslike. " It's worth more."

But Izzy had gone as far as his conscience would let

him, further than he had intended in the beginning. He stuck to his terms.

The bargain was not after all so one-sided as it might appear. The building was certainly worth more, but it would have to be sold, if it could be sold at all, on much more extended terms, for ready cash was a scarce commodity in Gateway even among well-to-do citizens. And for Dick ready money was vital.

After a few half-hearted objections he capitulated.

The money was duly forthcoming. Izzy was prompt once the deal had been made, and in two weeks he was busily remodelling the old building to his needs. His business improved steadily, but he remained the same patient, deferential, obliging vendor of nickel's worths.

Dick paid off the most pressing of his debts and re-established his credit, but his business did not improve. No man can do his best with a divided mind, and Molly, like an evil angel, stood between him and what he might have accomplished if he had not been infatuated with her.

CHAPTER V

CONQUEST GATES was at work in his office at the mill. The machinery filled the place with a low thunder and made the whole building quiver. There was a strong floury smell in the air and a fine grey dust lay thick over everything.

Old Tom Gates was in the office too. Failing eyesight and a chronic state of intoxication made it impossible for him to take any active part in the business, but when he was not in the Imperial bar or in a drunken stupor at home, he liked to potter about the place, giving his son the benefit of the maxims that had governed his own long and dishonourable career.

He was shorter even than his son and very much bent. He wore heavy smoked glasses, being totally blind of one eye and only able to distinguish large objects at a short distance with the other. But in some mysterious manner he contrived to gain a remarkably clear idea of the general trend of affairs in spite of Con's purposeful incommunicativeness.

"We ain't doin' the business, we ain't doin' the business," he cackled querulously. "You're skinnin' 'em too close. I'm always tellin' you, but you don't pay no 'tention to me. You're skinnin' 'em too close."

He was seized with a choking cough. When he had ceased to wipe his eyes and to contort his body into grotesque attitudes, he went on.

"Of course, that's what farmers is for, to be skun. But you got to use judgment, if you take all the hide off of a hayseed first trip, he'll get sore an' won't come back. Skin 'em a little bit this trip an' a little bit next trip. Skin 'em on grade an' dockage, but let 'em have it a little on the weight. Or skin 'em on the weight an' give 'em the grade, accordin' as they're heavy on weight or grade. Some's one way an' some's the other. Find out."

Con grunted discourteously.

"That's right, snork at me. I'm always tellin' you but you won't pay no 'tention to me. You can't skin 'em three ways, it ain't good business. I tried it an' I know. I always trimmed 'em as close as it could be done. An' you got competition now, don't forget that. You better pay a little 'tention to what I say. Skin 'em, but skin 'em easy so they won't notice. A little bit now an' a little later, or they'll go over to the North-Western. You mind what I tell you."

"Shucks," said Con, "them robbers over at the N.W. don't only skin 'em, they take an' boil 'em for the tallow. I'm easy with them."

Of the many dishonest businesses that flourished in the Canadian West owing to the supineness of an indifferent and often corrupt government at Ottawa, the grain trade probably was the most infested with conscienceless pirates.

"Bullheaded," said Old Tom. "Know too damn much, that's you. Well, I'm goin' down the street to see what's stirrin'."

He groped his way out of the mill, and down the street

to the Imperial bar, where he would spend the rest of the morning.

Con was left alone scowling at his books. The old-established firm of Gates & Son was in a bad way. A number of factors were working against it. For one thing, the mill had been built in the days before the railway came to Gateway and, while conveniently situated for those days, was now nearly half a mile from the tracks. This involved heavy haulage charges on all outbound shipments. The machinery also was antiquated and there was no money for a new plant.

Then the North-Western Milling Company, locally known as the N.W., had lately built a mill and elevator on the tracks and were making a strong bid for the local trade.

They sheared the farmers close—all grain buyers do that as a matter of course—but they were not quite so merciless in their methods as Con. His greed over-reached his judgment. While he was no more dishonest than his estimable father, he was less tactful, and lost business in consequence.

The final handicap under which the concern laboured was that he was an inveterate gambler. He had been playing the Winnipeg wheat market with more or less success for the past two years, but his latest and heaviest plunge had been a disastrous failure. The automobile he had bought to compete with Dick's Bluebird was still unpaid for, and the vendors were clamouring for their money.

The car had been a success up to a certain point. Molly rode in it willingly, and he had had the pleasure of leaving Dick and his fast-trotting mare far in the rear more than once.

But Molly seemed as far as ever from accepting him as a husband, she refused to dismiss Dick or to give a direct answer to any proposal. Con raged inwardly. He hated her at times almost to the point of outrage or murder, but his whole being remained permeated by his lust for her.

* * *

"Well, louse-skinner," said a deep voice behind him, "how in blazes are you?"

Con swung round on his stool with a scowl. A hairy, unclean, bearlike man blocked the door with huge shoulders, though owing to his weirdly bowed legs he was little more than a dwarf in stature. His face was almost hidden in a mat of red, black and silver hairs, and there was a little tuft of red bristles on the end of his square prominent nose. His eyebrows were like curtains over small grey eyes, greedy and cunning and bold, which peered at Con with a sardonic twinkle. His whole person exhaled a strong and disgusting animal smell.

"Hello, Bullpuncher," said Con with a sour grin, "in with a load?"

"In to get robbed again," was the uncompromising reply. "I got sixty bushel of good wheat in my wagon an' you can't skin me out of more'n two of 'em or I'll have you pinched. An' gimme the grade too, it ain't froze, nor tough, nor smutty, nor nothin'. Come on out, you widder-robber."

Con came. He disliked Bullpuncher intensely, but the old ruffian could be counted on for several hundred bushels of wheat, and he could not afford to lose a customer. There ensued a lively wrangle. Bullpuncher invariably haggled, he could not read or write, but he was not to be cheated in any transaction.

He complained of the grade, declaring his wheat was No. 1, while Con would only concede No. 2. He swore the scales were crooked, which was true, but not to the extent he averred. He objected vehemently to the dockage, which was excessive, but not more so than customary in the grain trade. Finally, and most vociferously, he denounced the price.

But when the last point had been threshed out, he at once recovered his good humour. He had indeed been more fairly treated than the general run of customers at the mill, for Gates & Son had long ago given up much hope of getting the better of him.

His real name was James Smith, though universally known as Bullpuncher. He was upwards of sixty, a bachelor, and lived with his team of oxen in a log hovel with a sod roof some fifteen miles from town. He was too penurious even to keep a dog. His ways were his own, he owed nobody, had no friends, and was reputed worth a good deal of money.

Returning to the office, he took some short willow sticks from his pocket, peeled and flattened on both sides, and proceeded to notch one according to some obscure method of his own with his knife. The sticks were his ledgers, and by their means he contrived to keep wonderfully accurate accounts.

"Fifty-six and a half bushel," he grunted. "Done me out of four bushel anyway, you grave-robber. No. 2, you horse-thief, ought to be No. 1 an' you know it. Forty-six cents a bushel—forty-six cents. You're a man'd steal the pennies off of a dead man's eyes. Gosh, I never was so shenaniganned in all my life. It's a wonder you wouldn't take the shirt off of my back. How much does that make?"

"Twenty-six dollars," said Con.

"Bet you're lyin'. Fifty-six an' a half by forty-six. Fifty by forty, by six by six. Damn that half."

He was busy counting on his fingers and muttering for some minutes. By what means he arrived at the result Con could never understand, but he invariably worked out the correct answer to any sum in time.

"Twenty-six dollars even it is," he said at last. "Hell's cornpatch, that don't pay for haulin' it."

Bullpuncher's oaths were varied and peculiar, but it was a curious fact that he was seldom either blasphemous or obscene in a country where most men were habitually both.

His tally stick was now covered with a cryptic arrangement of notches, and he handed it to Con, who wrote upon it the number of bushels, price and amount, and signed it.

"Now," said Bullpuncher, pocketing his tally, "I'm goin' to be in town next week with a load, maybe two. I got to pay my taxes, an' there's a payment on my binder, an' I owe Jake Long. But we'll fix that up after. Now, don't you forget you owe me twenty-six dollars, an' don't skip the country. So long, you old chicken-stealer."

He lurched out of the office, heaved himself up into his wagon with a jerk of his powerful arms, and roared at his team of big red oxen. They got under way with a heave and a snort, and strolled away down the street.

* * *

They had an unusually mild and cloudy October that year, but in the last week the skies cleared and it froze hard at night. The sunny days were softly warm, and the whole land was steeped in a quietude of approaching death, a short and belated Indian summer.

Then it came on to blow straight from the Pole under a turquoise sky, a wind like an executioner's axe, and ice crept out from the shores of pond and lake, and the Sweetwater was soon full of drifting floes.

The wind blew itself out, and there fell a night of deep calm and mighty frost. Before morning it was thirty degrees below zero, the Sweetwater was masked from bank to bank in ice, and every lake was frozen inches thick.

Then a wind sprang up in the east, and brought the low, ragged, grey snowclouds trailing up from Hudson's Bay. From them there fell tiny dry flakes that whirled and danced and alighted, and rose again, so that a man could hardly see his hand before his face in the gusts. And when that was over the Canadian West had settled down under its white mantle for a five-month long slumber.

Dick came into his own again, for Con had to put up his car, and Bluebird, a smart red cutter at her heels and a string of sweet-toned little bells on her harness, went jingling over the snow, the white steam spurting from her nostrils.

Molly, of course, he took often, Jessie Jenifree once or twice, and once he took Golden and Pearly. Not that he wanted to take Golden, but he began to feel a warm brotherly affection for Pearly, who seemed so much to admire him, and who evidently got so little fun out of life.

"She's a nice kid," he told his mother. "Not a bit like the rest of the family. They're pretty hard on her—make her do all the housework, an' hardly ever give her any fun."

"I don't like them Gateses," said his mother. "Your poor pa always quarrelled awful with old Tom—they had a fight two or three times. But maybe Pearly's a nice

girl. Are you goin' with her, son? I thought it was that Molly McLay."

"No, of course I ain't goin' with her," said Dick impatiently. "You do get some of the dernedest notions, ma. Why, she's only a kid. I wish you'd listen to what I say some time."

But modern events interested his mother very little. She had loved her testy and intemperate husband, and was busy building up a legend about him, and conning old memories. Unless some case of misfortune or grave illness in the town came to her notice, she knew little of current events. She was fond of her son, but she had never pretended to understand him, and they had strangely little in common; his resentful memories of his father's tyranny cut him off from her to a large extent.

Yet she felt she ought to show some interest in his affairs.

"That Jessie Jenifree's a nice girl," she said vaguely, "I think she'd make a nice wife for you, goes to church regular, teaches in Sunday school, ain't flighty, dresses neat, an' a good worker around the house they tell me. Why don't you go with her?"

"Well, I'm not goin' with her," said Dick loudly. "You don't need to go around pickin' wives for me: I can do my own pickin'."

"Yes, yes, always was self-willed, that's what your poor pa said. He said, 'That boy's stubborn as a mule, but it ain't always the self-willed folks that makes out best in the end, an' he'll find that out one day.' He said that, an' he was right too, like I remember a feller . . ."

But Dick had gone out, and the rest of the anecdote is lost to the world.

He had gone to take Molly to the skating rink, the centre

of a Canadian town's winter life. Town-bred Canadians learn to skate almost as soon as they can walk, and there were many fine skaters in Gateway, few better than Dick. Con carried his awkwardness on to the ice as on to the dancing floor.

Molly skated with indolent grace, her tall figure swaying to the strains of the town band. But she was too lazy to skate much at a time, and Dick had to find other partners. Jessie Jenifree skated with the quiet efficiency which characterized all her actions, but with that hint of stiffness which invariably robbed her of the epithet charming.

Golden was a miracle on the ice, a floating, skimming, darting creature that one almost expected to take wing and flash upward.

Only on the ice. Grim whispers were circulating about her, and the more timid drew away. The deadliest scourge of the North had marked her sallow cheeks with the crimson print of its finger-tips, and her eyes had an unnatural brilliance. Often she had to hurry from the ice, shaken by terrible paroxysms of coughing.

She never gave in, but turned her head resolutely from the dark shadow. She had a bad cold, she admitted, but it would certainly leave her in the spring. The fires of her spirit blazed higher as her bodily fires sank, and she had never loved or hated with such intensity.

Then there was Pearly, almost as swift and graceful as her sister, and incomparably prettier and more amiable. Dick enjoyed skating with her. She had a vein of humour, an appreciation of the whimsicalities of life without Golden's acerbity.

There were dances, too, in the town hall, and concerts with home talent. Once a barnstorming company came to

town with a washed out version of a musical comedy, but it seemed very delightful to folk who knew next to nothing of the theatre.

There were sleighing parties, where twenty or thirty young people of both sexes piled upon hayracks and burrowed into the sweet smelling straw, singing and frolicking along moonlit trails in the frosty sparkling air. They would return with noble appetites to a big supper and an impromptu dance to follow.

Westerners know how to keep their long winters from becoming dreary.

* * *

Con reached the end of his financial tether early in December. The bank refused to lend him any more money even to buy wheat, and his father steadily refused to raise money on the mill.

Bullpuncher came in one day with a load, in below zero weather, and a bitter wind. He had to be helped out of his sleigh, so stiff with cold was he.

"I'm froze, I'm froze," he muttered hoarsely, as he crouched over the steam radiator in the office. "Feel as if I'd eat a bellyful of ice. This is the worst winter I ever seen in my life—never used to feel the cold this way."

"You will get froze if you go on ridin'," said Con. "Why don't you get out an' walk part way?"

"Me walk," said Bullpuncher with scorn. "I been forty winters in the West an' I never walked yet, no time an' no weather. I ain't agoin' to commence now neither."

"Then you'd best be careful about startin' for town in bad weather."

"Who? me? I don't have to be careful. I'm tough, that's what I am. Besides, I got to get my wheat to town."

He came away from the radiator. "Well, I'm kind of half thawed out now ; let's see what you jewed me out of on this load."

The usual wrangle was gone through, but the tally finally made up and signed, and he went away.

"He's gettin' old," thought Con, looking after him malevolently. "He will freeze to death on the trail some day. Wish he would, the dirty old yahoo, then I wouldn't have to pay him for his wheat. I owe him two hundred dollars now and I haven't got it. There'll be the devil to pay when he wants his money, he'd jail his own mother for a nickel."

Bullpuncher made three more trips in quick succession, and each time complained bitterly of the cold.

"Next trip'll be my last," he reminded Con. "I'll be in day before Christmas with a load of wood for the Slingsbys, an' I want you to have the money ready for me. I want to pay up all my debts an' get squared away for next year. I'll be in here bright an' ready mornin' after Christmas Day, an' you have the cash money waitin' for me—no cheques. You owe me three hundred an' three dollars an' twenty cents an' I'm goin' to get every cent of it."

He laughed as he said it, but Con knew it was no idle threat.

He was left to face an apparently hopeless situation. He had other pressing debts, and more teams than ever were passing the mill on their way to the rival elevator.

There was nothing further to be hoped for from the bank, for the wheat market was in a depressed condition, and his father would not hear of a mortgage on the mill.

The old man was giving increasing evidence of a complete mental breakdown, and his dutiful son was preparing to

have him adjudged incompetent to administer his affairs. But that would require legal formalities and take time, and the essence of his condition was that he could not wait.

"Guess I'll have to rob a bank," he said to himself, and laughed mirthlessly. "Rob a bank," he repeated. "Gad, there don't seem to be anything else I can do."

Given the opportunity, the average man in extremity will steal, but to the normally honest man the idea of a deliberately planned crime never occurs.

A predatory and unprincipled nature like Con's, on the other hand, instinctively turns to thoughts of violence and crime. He had no inhibitions beyond a selfish dislike of imperilling his own safety. Between financial ruin and the loss of Molly on the one hand, and robbery on the other, he was not likely to hesitate long. A crime, if it could be safely and profitably managed, would be by far the lesser evil.

To rob a bank, he reflected, would be profitable but very dangerous, and he was too well known for a hold-up. The two branch banks were housed in brick buildings provided with strong vaults, and to break into them he would require technical knowledge and equipment that he could not acquire on short notice.

The hotels often had considerable sums of money on hand, but the night clerk would have to be disposed of. It was too risky.

There remained the stores. He was a man of action, to whom thought was distasteful and laborious. He decided to go out and view the possibilities, and he was surprised with what he observed.

Gateway had never had to contend with professional cracksmen. The crimes that exercised its judicial system

were mostly petty thefts by amateurs, cattle or horse stealing, or violence, generally traceable to drink or a woman.

No one but the banks, it appeared to Con, had taken more than the most elementary precautions against burglary. Every store in town could be broken into with ease. Greatly heartened, he proceeded to pick out his intended victim.

Isenberg seemed to be doing a lot of business, and Jake Long had been long established and had a big trade. Billy Holm, the jeweller, had a tempting display in his window.

A little thing inclined the scale and formed his decision. He remembered that Molly would be expecting a Christmas present, and she had hinted often enough at her fondness for jewellery. He had viewed Holm's premises from without ; by going in under pretence of picking out her present he would be afforded an excellent opportunity of inspecting the interior.

He had a perverted sense of humour, and he reflected with a grim chuckle that he could afford to be magnificent in his gift, for he would get back any money he had spent in the store.

He concluded that Christmas Eve would be the most favourable time for the attempt. Holm would have done his best day's business of the year, and it was unlikely that anyone would visit the store until the morning after Christmas.

* * *

It was Christmas Eve, and the Slingsbys were growing anxious. The unusually cold weather had made serious inroads upon their woodpile, and all afternoon they had been expecting Bullpuncher in with a load of jackpine.

Now darkness had come and they faced the possibility of a fireless Christmas.

It was very cold out of doors and very still. People did not linger on the streets that evening. The snow squeaked underfoot, and the smoke of the town mushroomed out and descended into the streets in the shape of a grey fog.

Maw Slingsby fed their dwindling fuel stick by stick into the stove in the kitchen. She had come originally from a warmer climate and had never grown accustomed to the Western cold. She sat muffled to the ears in heavy shawls.

Pop sat on the other side of the stove, whittling a stick and whistling soundlessly. He cast an occasional wary glance on his spouse, whose temper he perceived to be rising. He had an uncomfortable certainty that if Bullpuncher did not soon appear he would be called upon to do something unpleasant, something that involved physical exertion, and he had never loved work.

"De devil, de devil, dhat Bullpuncher," said Maw in her deep voice. "We go freeze to deat'. He never t'ink of us, de devil dhat Bullpuncher."

"Oh, he'll be along any time now," said Pop soothingly. "You see."

"Cornelius, you are damn fool. I make you go get wood pretty soon. Don't you talk to me."

Pop winced and was silent. He had been hoping to get down town for a drink before the bars closed, but he knew Maw would give him no money unless Bullpuncher arrived.

Though he called himself an insurance agent, and occasionally picked up a few dollars that way, it was Maw who maintained the household. She had some reputation as a fortune teller, she made mats and knitted stockings and

mitten, and occasionally she substituted for one of the hotel cooks. She might have had a steady job cooking, but her independent spirit would not permit her to work for anyone long.

"Pssst," said Pop, suddenly lifting a hand, "Sounds like sleigh runners."

They listened intently. From without there came a low cheeping and grinding such as loaded sleighs make in very cold weather. The noise drew nearer and stopped at the door.

"It's him all right," said Pop, rising and drawing on his coat. "He'll be half-froze."

He went out. Bullpuncher's oxen stood there, coated all over with white frost and with long icicles hanging from their noses. They blew heavily and chewed their cuds. At their heels stood a high-built load of jackpine poles, and perched up aloft a huddled and motionless figure in a fur coat.

"Hello there, old-timer, you must be froze to death," cried Pop. "Come on down. Want a hand?"

Bullpuncher said nothing, nor did he move.

"What's the matter? Hey, come on down," said Pop uneasily, and reached up to twitch the skirt of the ragged fur coat.

Bullpuncher came with appalling suddenness. His heavy body rolled over on Pop's shoulders and bore him to the ground. Pop's high-pitched squeal of pain and fear brought Maw out.

"Hey, what you fight about?" she demanded sternly, and gripped Bullpuncher by the collar.

But his weight defied even her strength. He was a man of ice, long since frozen through and through. She recoiled

with a cry, and Pop wriggled from under the body and scrambled to his feet. The pair stood petrified, staring down at the grim thing at their feet.

"He's froze, he's froze stiff," whimpered Pop.

"Bring him in de house," commanded Maw. "You take his foots."

They lifted the stonelike mass between them and dragged it into the house.

"You run for doctor," ordered Maw. "Hustle you dhere."

Pop fled, only too glad to escape. Maw stood and looked at the body, hands on hips and a heavy frown creasing her forehead. She was not afraid, merely annoyed. Bullpuncher was in the habit of putting up with her on his trips to town to save hotel bills, and he owed her more than one load of wood already. If he was dead, she had been cheated.

She had a truly feminine sense of what was due her. Perhaps Bullpuncher had something in his pockets that would liquidate the debt. She fell upon her knees and began without the least repugnance to search them. All she found was a half-plug of chewing tobacco, a pocket knife, some bits of string, a few nails and matches, and eleven flat pieces of wood curiously notched.

The tally sticks puzzled her. She rose to her feet to examine them by the light of the little oil lamp. There was writing on them, as she could recognize, but as she could not read it told her nothing. There remained the feeling though that they were things of value. She was still staring at them when she heard the crunch of feet without, and hastily hid them away.

Pop entered, out of breath, with the obese Dr. Thoms puffing at his heels.

"Here he is, Maw. Now I got to go out an' put the bulls in the barn or they'll freeze."

His wife having, for once, no attention to spare for him, he slipped out, put up the oxen in a little stable behind the house, and hurried to the Palace bar.

His nerves had been badly shaken and he felt the need of a sedative. Also he had a story to tell that would be good for many drinks. Also the opportunity of escaping Maw's vigilance and the necessity of cutting wood for the stove was too good to be missed.

He passed an enjoyable evening ; his story, graphically told and with added detail at each repetition, being worth more free drinks than he was able to keep count of.

When the bar closed at eleven and he was thrust into the street, two friends piloted him home. But they deserted him at his door, no man in Gateway being bold enough to face Maw in her wrath.

Pop stood utterly alone and he was unhappy, for though he was drunk he was not drunk enough not to know what was going to happen.

Maw issued from the house with measured and inexorable step. She gripped Pop by the collar and one elbow, she applied her knee to his rear, and propelled him swiftly and violently into the house. Still holding him firmly, she kicked the door shut behind her.

Then she shook him by the shoulders, back and forth and from side to side until he was dizzy. Next she boxed his ears until he was dizzier. Finally she shook him out of his coat like a cat out of a sack, pulled up the trapdoor leading to the cellar, and drove him down the ladder.

Panting a little with her exertions, she wiped her hands on her apron. "You, Cornelius," she said in unimpassioned

tones, "for been drunk you stay down cellar till you are sober."

Bullpuncher's body had been removed, and Maw had taken the axe and cut up enough wood for the night. Down in the cellar Pop whimpered for a little while and then fell asleep on the pile of sacks that had been his bed of repentance on many a similar occasion.

Until early morning Maw sat and pondered on the tally sticks which represented the eleven loads of wheat their dead owner had delivered to Con, and because of which Con was at that very moment committing his first burglary.

At last she shook her head, listened to hear if Pop was stirring, hid the sticks carefully away, and went calmly to bed.

CHAPTER VI

A CHANGE in the weather came about midnight with a gradual clouding of the sky. Between one and two in the morning, when Con slipped out of the house, it was snowing lightly and the temperature had risen. He did not know whether to bless the snow or to curse it. It would cover his tracks if it continued long enough, or it would write the story of his crime large upon the ground for everyone to read.

He could feel the heavy beat of his heart and his throat was tight and dry. There was a feral gleam in his eyes, and in his present mood he would kill without mercy. But all Gateway was within doors and the streets deserted.

He turned into the lane that ran parallel with Water Street behind the row of stores, and arrived at the rear of Billy Holm's place. Here there was a cordwood chute, carelessly secured with a simple hasp on the outside, as he had assured himself on the previous evening. To open it and to slip down into the basement was the work of a moment.

It was pitch dark down there, but he had provided himself with a flashlight. So far he was safe, but a moment later he knocked over a shovel leaning against the furnace, and it went down with a crash that seemed to him to echo through all space. Sweat started from his every pore, and he darted into a corner and crouched.

But the minutes passed and nothing happened. When he had got back his breath and the tumultuous throbbing of the blood in his ears had lessened, he took courage again and made for the stairs leading up into the store.

The door at the top was fastened on the inside, but he had brought a small crowbar with him and soon pried out the light staple. Within the store itself everything seemed to have been arranged especially for his convenience. The safe stood in a deep alcove screened from the body of the store by a curtain. There was a window in the rear wall, but it was small and high up so that no one could look in from the outside.

The safe itself was large and had a formidable look to his inexperienced eyes. He had once seen the combination punched out of a safe with a cold chisel and hammer, and had brought these tools with him. But it looked as if it might be a long job.

Without any definite idea in his mind he fumbled with the handle. To his blank amazement it turned easily in his grasp and the door swung open. The combination had been out of order for some time, and Holm had always been intending to have it repaired, but there were no safe experts nearer than Winnipeg and it was an expensive matter to bring one to Gateway.

There was a second pair of doors of light steel, which had been locked, but the cold chisel and hammer made short work of them. The whole thing had been almost play.

With the born gambler's belief in luck, Con felt that fortune had expressly favoured him. If he followed the run boldly while it held, anything he desired would be his. He acted boldly and coolly.

On the shelves there were piled shallow trays of rings, watches and trinkets, none of exceptional value singly, but representing in the aggregate a respectable sum. In a drawer had been carelessly thrown an unsorted bundle of cheques and bills and a canvas bag containing silver. All went into Con's sack in a moment.

There he should have halted, but everything had gone so well that he felt he would be foolish if he left anything of value behind him. Like many another criminal, he was too greedy.

On his visit the day before, ostensibly to buy a present for Molly, Holm had tried hard to sell him one of two sterling silver tea-sets. He told himself with sardonic amusement that he would oblige Billy by taking not one but both sets.

One of Gateway's scattered street lamps shed sufficient light to enable him to dispense with his flashlight in rifling the showcases. He put the two tea-sets and several other articles Holm had assured him were sterling silver into his sack.

He now had all he could comfortably carry and there seemed nothing of great value left, and so, in twenty minutes from the time he had entered the place he was emerging safely with his plunder.

It was snowing quite hard, covering all tracks almost as soon as they were made, and there was no one in sight. He retraced his steps down the lane, filled with a chuckling exultation.

Burglary, he felt, was the easiest and pleasantest of all trades, provided only that a man had nerve. He magnified his exploit to himself as he went along, and his only regret was that there was no one to whom he dare boast about it. This was an incomparably better method of making a

living than cheating farmers out of a few bushels of wheat each day.

These pleasant musings were rudely cut short. He had nearly reached the end of the lane and a few more steps would bring him out on a quiet street running back from the river, when from directly in front of him there rose a sonorous voice.

"Cracker," it cried, "hey, Cracker. Where in hell are you at?"

The startled Con looked about for a way of escape, but the lane was narrow and without hiding places. On one side ran a high board fence and on the other the row of Water Street stores. The owner of the voice was approaching rapidly.

He hurried back the way he had come. The falling snow muffled his footfalls but the silver on his back began to jingle, and he had to moderate his pace.

He had all but reached the end of the lane which debouched on Maple Avenue, when there rose up in his path an animated snowman, which clasped him affectionately round the neck and hiccupped.

"Hullo-'ullo, Fa-ar Chrishmush."

He recognised Cracker, rather more drunk than usual. He was seized by a red impulse to kill, and it was fortunate for the remittance man that his tight embrace immobilized the burglar's free arm.

"Bally well caught you, you old blighter," gurgled Cracker jovially. "Jolly old bag of toysh and all. But wheresh your white whishkersh?"

"What do you want? Let me go," said Con in a low furious voice, trying to shake him off.

But Cracker only clung the tighter. "Wheresh your

hurry, Fa-ar Chrishmush?" he babbled. "Ni'-nightsh young yet. I'm a blinkin' wait, I am—shing Chrishmush carolsh—hear me."

"For God's sake, shut up," whispered Con fiercely, determined to brain the drunken fool in another moment with his crowbar.

"I'm a wait," repeated Cracker solemnly, "waiting for she Colonel. He'sh drunk too, mush drunker'n I am. He'sh looking for me. He-he-he."

From close at hand rose the deep voice of Colonel Robert Lee Long, "Damn you, Cracker, where you got to?"

In answer the remittance man lifted a cracked and quavering tenor voice. "God resh you me-y gen'l'men, le'nushin you dishmay."

Then Con jerked away so violently that he sat down heavily in the snow and the carol came to an abrupt end.

There was nothing for it now but to run, and Con ran at top speed, the silver jingling maddeningly at his back. He darted out of the alley, across Maple Avenue, and down another lane. Behind him he could hear the Colonel upraiding his friend in loud and indignant tones, but Cracker's reply was inaudible.

Fifteen minutes later, much out of breath and with badly shaken nerves, the amateur cracksman crept up to the back door of his home by a roundabout route. He did not think Cracker had recognized him, for he had worn an old coat and a heavy woollen cap pulled low over his eyes. But he half-regretted that he had not struck the remittance man a killing blow and made sure of his silence.

* * *

It was Christmas morning, and Dick arose in a buoyant

humour unusual to him of late. He filled the house with shouts.

"O do beehave, sonny," chided his mother.

"Merry Christmas, ma," he bawled in reply. "Where's my stockin'?"

"I don't believe you'll never grow up. Your stockin', at your age! You're just as kiddish as what you was when you'd be up at three in the mornin' to see what Santy had brung you. Your poor pa, he always said you was nothin' but a big overgrown kid—he said you wouldn't never have no real sense."

But her eyes were fond, if watery, and when he hugged her and gave her a little silver mesh bag for a present, she beamed with delight.

"That's good of you, sonny, mff," she said. "Haven't forgot your old fool ma yet, have you?"

She went to the cupboard and brought out her own present, a most hideous red and black muffler almost as big as a shawl.

"Now here's somethin' I want you would wear for me," she said appealingly. "You know you got a weak chest an' don't take half enough care of yourself. You'll get the noomony one of these here days or the consumption or somethin' goin' on the way like you do. I don't know what'd happen you if I wasn't around to take some care of you—an' it's little enough you'll let me do, goodness knows—an' the weather so cold. But you're like your poor pa that way—he always would go out without his rubbers in the wet. An' there's that little Billy Jakes, he run out the other day without his jacket an' it zero weather an' his mother not watchin', an' now he's sick abed. Shouldn't wonder neither but what he'd die of it."

Dick turned the abomination over in his hands. The very sight of it pained him, but it was Christmas day and he knew she meant well. He tried to throw some heartiness into his voice.

"It's just fine, ma, just dandy. Sure I'll wear it."

He let her wind it round and round his neck and spread the fringed ends across his chest. But when he had left the house and knew he was out of sight, he took it off hastily and stuffed it into his pocket.

He had left Molly's Christmas present at the store. It was a valuable fur coat, the purchase of which had put a heavy strain on his depleted resources. But then nothing, not even life itself, was too precious an offering for Molly.

She met him at the door, a finger on her lip. "Sssh," she said. "Father came home last night. He's in the parlour, come in here."

She took him into the cramped dining room. The place was fireless and bitterly cold, for Alexander McLay was a frugal man, and in winter the family lived in the kitchen. Even on Christmas Day, with a raw zero wind scattering gritty snow over the town, there was only one fire in the house.

"Merry Christmas, Moll, here's a little present for you."

"Is it something nice, Dickie? It's heavy. What's in it?"

Her eager fingers were busy with the bulky parcel, while he stood by smiling fatuously.

"Ooh, Dickie, a fur coat. I've wanted one so much. Does it fit? Help me on with it. That miserable glass—we haven't a decent glass in the house. Does it really fit?"

She twisted and turned before the inadequate glass over

the sideboard, looking down over her shoulder, patting the silky fur with her hands. Then she remembered him.

She put an arm spontaneously about his neck and kissed him with a warmth of feeling he had never observed in her before. He was too much in love to wonder how much of it was for him and how much for his gift ; a kiss would have seemed to him ample reward for a much greater matter.

Such bliss could not last. There came a solid thump at the door, and she ran out. Dick heard her voice, welcoming his rival.

"Merry Christmas, Con. No, father's in there, come in here."

The pair usually contrived to avoid each other. It was like Molly's superb audacity to bring them together, confident of her own ability to handle the situation.

"Here's Dickie Black. Say Merry Christmas to him, Con."

Con complied in a low growl. He was heavy-eyed and more than usually sullen-looking, and his big blue chin stuck out like a snow plough.

"Merry Christmas, Gates," said Dick, trying to put some heartiness into his voice, and to derive what consolation he could from the reflection that he had had a kiss and Con was not likely to get one.

"Here," said Con gruffly, pushing a small parcel into Molly's willing hand.

"Little," said Molly. "Little and nice. A watch. O Con, how perfectly sweet of you. If Dickie wasn't here, I'd kiss you."

"Go ahead. I don't mind," said Con, grinning malevolently at Dick, who felt black depression creeping over his soul.

"Come in and say Merry Christmas to the folks," said Molly hastily, and led the way into the kitchen.

Mrs. McLay was a gaunt and angular woman with a resigned but hungry look, and a large wart on the side of her nose. The fourth member of the family was fourteen-year-old Margaret, who resembled her mother exactly in every respect but that of the wart.

The kitchen was pleasantly warm, but the greetings exchanged were clammy. The general atmosphere of the house was that of a place where a funeral is about to take place, with the corpse lying in state in the parlour. Mr. McLay represented the corpse in all but the fact that he was sitting up.

Molly dutifully led her visitors in to wish him the compliments of the season. They found him sitting in a heavy jacket, the steam of his breath hanging in a little cloud over his head. He was no believer in a pampered existence, as befitted a man who had eaten frozen dog meat in his time on the sheltered side of a willow bush with the temperature at fifty below zero.

He was a handsome, white-headed man, extremely like his daughter. But her face looked as if it had been chiselled from delicately tinted marble, his as if from grey granite by a bolder hand and on a more massive scale.

He put down the bible he was reading and gave them a steady cold glance and a slight inclination of the head.

"Good day to ye," he said, and took up his book again.

The McLays were not poor, for Alexander had not traded with Indians for forty years on purely altruistic principles. He could skin a flint with the best, but in addition to a strong objection to idle conversation he regarded the lavish spending of money as criminal.

His bible and his bank book were equally sacred in his eyes, and he would no more have diminished the one than the other. He considered oatmeal and potatoes an ideal diet if not immoderately indulged in, and to preserve his family from the sin of gluttony he left them only money enough to buy a stated quantity of each when he went north on a trading trip.

He was often away longer than expected, and then semi-starvation reigned in the family. He would not permit them to buy anything on credit. Mrs. McLay did plain sewing when she could get it, and Margaret minded babies for quarters when their parents wished to go to a dance, but the pair came by their famished look honestly.

Molly fared a little better, for if there was a spot of lesser hardness in the granitic texture of Alexander McLay's heart, it was for his handsome daughter. In melting moods she could even get him to part with sums of money, but his repentance was awful.

She led her suitors back to the dining room. An awkward pause ensued. There was no possibility of either making an appointment with her for that day, for her father disapproved on religious grounds of frivolous doings at Christmas—or at any other time for that matter—but each man was resolved to outstay the other.

She solved the problem by saying, "Now, you'll have to be goin', boys, I must get ready for church. See you both later. Merry Christmas and thanks, both of you."

They went out stiffly side by side and separated without a word at the gate.

Gateway Protestants went to church *en masse* on Christmas morning. The Catholics had been up till late at midnight mass, and would not be visible again until afternoon.

The social function of the churches were very marked. The church one attended determined one's social circle, and to some extent one's standing.

The Catholics, mostly French-speaking, were doubly barred from much intercourse with their fellow citizens. Most of them lived in the west end, near the river, grouped around their church, and formed a voluntarily isolated community.

The Blacks were Anglicans and Dick dutifully escorted his mother to church.

The Gates family were Presbyterian. Old Tom Gates refusing to stir out of doors, Con growlingly accompanied his sisters to that place of worship, and sat and scowled through the service, wondering if Cracker had recognized him the night before, and what he would do if he had.

The McLays, under the stern leadership of Alexander, also attended the Presbyterian church, Molly presenting a strong contrast to the rest of the family in her handsome coat. Her mother and sister were threadbare and moved with dropped eyes in painful humiliation. Alexander himself was decent but old-fashioned in a broadcloth tail coat dating back to years before Molly was born.

Outside the churches people greeted each other cordially, for northerners are warm-hearted under their reserve, and on Christmas Day everyone unbends. Even the biting wind and the snow had no repressing effect.

In the afternoon and evening the skating rink was crowded, and all the younger generation, Protestant and Catholic alike, met on amicable terms.

There was little private entertaining in Gateway, for the houses were nearly all small, and the cost of heating a large building through five months of bitter cold prohibitive.

It was not customary to receive any but relations and very intimate friends into one's home.

There were no very rich people in the town and hardly any poor, if we except the halfbreeds living in squalid Philadelphia across the river. Social distinctions were still nebulous, and the hired girl sat down to table with the family and went with them to church socials or dances in the town hall as a matter of course.

Molly was at the rink in the afternoon, where Con and Dick skated with her alternately. When Con was skating with her, Dick took out Golden or Pearly or Jessie, but when she skated with him, Con stood glowering and rubbing his chin in a corner.

Golden was in the wildest spirits. Something more than her usual feverishness flamed in her brilliant eyes and dyed her cheekbones crimson. Dick saw her eyes fixed intently on Con more than once, and she would come out of brief fits of preoccupation with a burst of wild laughter or an edged witticism, spiteful and shrewd.

"Clem Woden's makin' eyes again at Mrs. Fitter, see? There's goin' to be a big bust-up there one of these days. They're pretty clever, but I've seen it ever since the second dance in the town hall in November. And there's Eileen Byrne making eyes at Cyril Scott—a Catholic and the minister's son—wonder what the reverend'll think of that?"

Dick was glad to escape from her to Pearly. "Say, is Golden, you know—she's actin' kind of funny? Seems worked up about something."

Pearly nodded with a worried look. "I don't know what's the matter, she's not right to-day. She and Con had a big fight this mornin', an' she's been actin' wild all day.

I'll have to try and get her home, it's not good for her bein' here."

He went on to Jessie, who was calm and smiling, talking in a low pleasant voice to which he need pay no attention unless he wished.

Molly had regained her poise ; the fur coat was already a thing of the past, and Dick was no nearer her than he had ever been.

Then there was a slight disturbance. Pearly had caught Golden and was leading her off the ice. Golden was coughing terribly, with her handkerchief pressed tight to her mouth. Con had to leave Molly, and help take her home.

And so Dick took Molly home after all, but she was tired and a little snappy. She told him he could not come in because her father would object, and took rather an abrupt leave of him.

When he thought it all over before he fell asleep, he decided that Christmas had somehow lost its glamour and he was sad. He was growing up.

* * *

Next day all Gateway was thrown into great excitement by the news of its first burglary.

Billy Holm discovered his loss upon opening his store about nine in the morning. His assistant arrived three minutes later and went off on the run to rouse the police department. The police department, consisting of Constable Joe Kenrick, arrived panting.

Joe had been town constable and licence inspector for four years, and had spent on the aggregate, one year of that time in hospital. At present he was enjoying excellent health, for his lumberjack friends were away in the woods for the winter.

He was a large and bony man, with a straddling walk, huge hands and a badly scarred face. On two occasions river drivers had walked over it in caulked boots. He was a man brave but resigned to misfortune.

"Uh-huh, huh-huh," he mused before the rifled safe. "Them doors was cracked open with a cold chisel, I shouldn't wonder. Something like that anyway. An' you couldn't lock the outer door, eh? Too bad. Anybody in town know of that?"

"I never told anybody," said Holm. "Bob Penney knew of it, of course."

"Ah." The constable fastened upon the luckless Penney a penetrating glance.

"I was dancin' till three o'clock Christmas mornin'," protested young Penney hastily, "an' last night I was played out an' went to bed early."

"You got a good alibi," admitted Kenrick grimly. "I'll ask you some more questions after a while, better stick around."

Continuing his investigations, he discovered that the door leading to the basement had been broken through. Below he found some lumps of snow Con had brought in on his feet, which had not yet melted. Elated by his success, he went out into the lane to look for tracks, but as it had been snowing on and off for forty-eight hours, he was there baffled.

The aid of the Mounted Police was next sought. They conducted a vigorous search for suspicious characters, but the crime remained unexplained. Young Penney had no difficulty in clearing his skirts of everything but a suspicion of complicity.

No shadow of suspicion rested upon Con. The fear

that Cracker might have recognised him kept awake for two nights, but the silence of the remittance man reassured him.

His booty he discovered to consist of between six and seven hundred dollars, something over four hundred of it in bills. Holm had done a good business for Christmas. He bundled the cheques up and hid them in a drawer in his desk, the bills he put in his pocket, the bag of silver in a suitcase.

Of the value of the jewellery he had stolen he could form no estimate. None of it could well be disposed of in Gateway, and he decided to take a trip to Winnipeg. The rings, bracelets, watches and pins would go into his suitcase easily enough, but he did not know what to do with the silver. He began to regret having taken it.

He had hidden the sack in the closet in his room, but he was on edge lest the eternally prying Golden should poke her long nose into it. He thought of taking it out of town and throwing it away, but there was a good deal of risk attached to that course. Finally, he dug a hole in the corner of the cellar and buried it.

The news of Bullpuncher's death was a minor sensation in town, but since such occurrences were not uncommon in a sparsely settled land, it took second place to the burglary.

Con heard it with great satisfaction. He did not know what had become of the tally sticks, for Maw Slingsby was still pondering over them in secret. He expected that they would turn up, and planned to repudiate them. It was another proof to him that his luck was in and nothing could go wrong wrong with him.

With his suitcase safely packed so that his loot should

not jingle, and business being now slack, he turned the plant over to his miller, and took train for Winnipeg.

The Western metropolis was then an overgrown, sprawling frontier town, wherein decrepit frame shacks rubbed elbows with substantial and even imposing buildings of brick. On both sides of Main Street from the Canadian Pacific Railway station almost to Portage Avenue stood innumerable pawnshops.

Their chief customers were stranded immigrants, who left there English saddles and the big revolvers most young Englishmen brought with them for the subjugation of Indians, buffalo, gophers, and other ferocious inhabitants of the untamed prairies.

After having interviewed his grain broker and made arrangements for a flutter on the market, Con made the round of the pawnshops, selling or pawning a little of his booty at each. He did not realize the risk he was running, but the police of the West at that time understood better how to cope with horse thieves than with cracksmen.

He was not asked any embarrassing questions, for it did not pay the proprietors of the shops to be too curious, but they paid him their own prices. He learnt, as every criminal learns, that it is easier to plunder than to dispose of the loot to advantage.

He was more fortunate on the wheat market. The great gamble, after a period of stagnation, had been artificially stirred to activity by the men behind the scenes. Prices were going up, temporarily, and he had the luck to get in at the bottom.

He did not neglect the lighter things of life. Winnipeg offered lurid attractions then to a man who was not too particular, and to a man of his coarse fibre its enjoyments

were delectable. Freed from the restraint of the prying eyes and wagging tongues of a small town, he indulged his taste in them freely. He spent very little money on men, but he was very kind to the ladies.

A longer stay would have brought disaster in some form or other, but he was reserved by the ironic gods for another fate.

He had been two weeks absent when he received an urgent telegram: "Father badly hurt. Come at once." —Golden.

He swore. What was it to him if his father was hurt? But a little reflection convinced him that it might be wiser to return; if the old man died he would need to be on the spot to protect his interests.

He instructed his broker to sell, and took the next train for the north. Luck again befriended him, for that day the wheat gamblers broke the market to collect their profits. He heard the news on the train and congratulated himself again upon his own excellent judgment.

He arrived to find his father dying.

Purblind and drunk, the old man had fallen down the steps leading from the Imperial bar to the street, breaking his thigh. The bone refused to set and senile gangrene developed. In a few days he was dead.

He was not greatly mourned by the community at large, and least of all, perhaps, by his own family. When sober he had been crabbed and morose, when drunk, a beast.

But they gave him a respectable funeral, and set about forgetting him as soon as possible. He had left no will, and all his property, comprising the mill, the house and a few vacant lots, fell to his children. Con promptly inter-

preted this to mean that it was all his, and proceeded to act accordingly.

He toured the town to inform all and sundry that his Winnipeg visit had been a brilliant success, that he had made a big killing on the wheat market and had had the foresight to get out before the break. Now that his father's property was in his own more capable hands he intended to show Gateway how things ought to be done. He would build a new mill on the tracks and give the North-Western a run.

All this was pleasant hearing to Molly, who had a reverence for money amounting to idolatry. But she was cautious: Con might not have as much money as he said. She decided to wait and see, and refused to commit herself. Con saw rather more of her and Dick rather less, but she skilfully maintained her grip on both. With the devoted Dick this was easy, but Con was often restive, and she had difficulty in avoiding a break with him.

Otherwise Con's popularity did not increase in the town, where village envy of the successful came in to reinforce the dislike his insufferable manners had always awakened.

CHAPTER VII

RELATIONS between Golden and her brother were more often strained than not. Only in his desire to marry Molly was she in cordial agreement with him. She reasoned that with Molly out of his reach, Dick might turn to her for consolation.

On almost all other subjects the pair quarrelled incessantly, and since his return from Winnipeg she had been watching and listening to him in a pregnant silence. At supper one evening he began mapping out his future with a fine disregard of anyone's interests but his own. His plans included marrying Molly, selling the old house and the mill and building new.

He boasted that he would run the North-Western out of business. Perhaps after doing that, he would leave Gateway altogether. It was a little hole of a town and a man with brains and ambition needed a wider field. He might go to Winnipeg, even to Chicago. He wanted to be where big things were possible and a man could make real money, and he was the man to do it.

He went on talking in this strain while Pearly cleared the table and washed the dishes in the kitchen. Golden drew up her rocking chair before the hot air register and listened to him with her chin in her hand and an expression of malign mockery in her face.

Pearly put on her coat and went out to pay a visit to a girl friend. She feared and disliked her brother, who

alternated in his treatment of her between bullying abuse and malicious teasing. She never remained long in his company if she could avoid it.

It was not until the house door had closed behind her that Golden spoke. "Sa-ay," she inquired in a provocative drawl, "ain't you forgettin' something."

"What's that?" he snapped, annoyed at the interruption.

"This whole works don't belong to you, Conquest Gates. You have everything figured out pretty nice for yourself—all the fine things you're goin' to do—but I don't notice anything about what we're goin' to do. Where do Pearly an' me come in on this? I've got something to say, and I'm goin' to say it, and what's more, you're goin' to listen."

"I am, eh?" he gibed. "Why do I have to listen to your blat?"

Golden's ugly nose twitched, and her crooked smile grew more venomous. "Who robbed Billy Holm's store?" she purred.

For a moment she thought he would spring upon her, and flung up a defensive arm. His swarthy face turned a dusky crimson, and he clenched his hairy fists. He glared at her with bloodshot eyes and the wide nostrils of his flat nose flared with quick breaths. Then the blood ebbed away from his cheeks, leaving them grey.

"How the hell do I know?" he replied with a feeble affectation of indifference.

She laughed shrilly. "Maybe you don't, eh? Where were you Christmas Eve?"

"None of your darn business, I don't have to tell you where I go."

"No, that's so, an' you don't either. But most times you come poundin' in the front door an' tramp up the stairs with your shoes on' wakin' everybody up. But Christmas Eve you crept in the back door—my cough kept me awake—an' you came in mighty quiet. What's more, you took your shoes off before you came upstairs, an' that ain't like you. An' next day, when I asked where you'd been, you jumped right onto me. You acted funny all day, scared like. An' why did you go to the 'Peg? You didn't have to go?"

"Bah, what's that all amount to?" he jeered. "You're just foolish, makin' an elephant out of a bug."

"Oh, am I. What were you doin' down cellar, two o'clock in the mornin' night before you went away? Pretty busy down there, weren't you?"

"Think I'm goin' to answer every fool question you like to ask me?" he demanded. "It's none of your business what I do."

"It ain't, eh? Well, after you'd gone I went down cellar myself and I saw a nice little pile of wood in the corner that wasn't there before, so I just moved it. Somebody'd been diggin' a hole under it. Maybe it wasn't you, maybe some stranger come along an' planted a couple of shiny silver teapots and such like in that hole eh?"

"What did you do with 'em?" he burst out.

"Nothing, they weren't mine. I left 'em there—think I'd bring 'em up an' use them in the house?"

He let out a deep breath and permitted his tense body to relax. She sat and watched him as a cat watches a mouse, but had apparently said all she wished.

Her silence became more than he could bear.

" Well, speak up, what are you goin' to do about it ? " he asked.

" That's a little better," she returned calmly. " Not quite so bossy now, are you ? "

" Well, tell me," he burst out hoarsely. " What are you goin' to do about it ? "

" I don't just know," she admitted. " It won't do me a particle of good to have you in jail, but you ain't goin' to boss me. Just remember that, Mr. Gates. You say you're goin' to do this an' that, but you better ask me what I think about it first. I won't butt in on your business, but when it comes to sellin' up the house an' bootin' Pearly an' me out in the snow I'll have something to say. You play square with us and it'll be all right, but you can drop that great ' I am ' stuff right away."

He gave an unpleasant laugh. He was thinking that nothing would be more delightful than to choke this venomous shrew to death. But she daunted him too ; he recognized in her an even more ruthless determination to have her will than his own. He was greedy and unprincipled, but there were a few softer spots in him : he was not incapable of generous impulses, he could be frightened, he had known honest regrets. But she was all passion and purpose, knowing neither pity, nor fear, nor remorse.

He said placatively, " Why, Golden, why do you want to talk like that ? Who's talkin' of bootin' you an' Pearly out ? Of course you have some say, I just thought I was doin' what was best for all of us. Go ahead an' tell me what you want."

She nodded with satisfaction. " Well then, how about a little money ? Pearly an' me haven't a rag to our names,

an' do you suppose this house runs itself? It's so long since I had a nickel of my own I pretty near forget what one looks like."

Con had no objection to spending money, few gamblers have, or even to giving it away—to any other woman but his sister. He looked upon money given to sisters as simply thrown away.

"Well then, here's a ten-spot," he said with a large gesture that concealed a pained reluctance.

She merely arched her brows. "Keep your chicken feed, I said money."

"Well, how much?"

"Make it what you like, only don't be a cheap skate."

"How much, damn it, how much?"

"Better make it a hundred—just to start with."

"A hundred! Good God, woman, do you think I'm made of money?"

"No, I think you're a tinhorn, all wind an' five for a nickel. Con Gates, you come across, you've got the money an' some of it's comin' to me. I'm wastin' no more time on you; loosen up now, or you'll find yourself in a place where you won't have much chance to blow any money."

"Don't forget," he reminded her significantly "that if I go over the road, Molly McLay'll marry Dickie Black. How'd that suit you?"

She set her teeth in her lip and looked at him with hate.

"That's the only reason you ain't in jail now, you dirty crook," she said in a furious whisper. "Give me that money an' shut up."

In sulky silence he counted out the bills into her outstretched palm. Then he marched out of the room, slamming the door viciously behind him.

For two months Gateway hibernated. The lumberjacks were away in the bush, the farmers more or less snowbound on their scattered homesteads, and the townsfolk chiefly occupied in cutting wood and feeding the fire.

Winter began to weigh heavily on everybody. The skating rink was losing its popularity for the season, even dances and church socials grew stale. People groaned that they were foolish to spend their lives in a country where snow covered the ground for nearly half the year.

They babbled of California, where people did not need fur coats and could go abroad without freezing their noses. California fever is a phase that afflicts the north-west every winter about February, though the first thaw dissipates it for another year.

And it was a particularly hard winter ; icy breezes galloped over the prairies, and blizzards piled the snow in huge drifts and disorganized traffic. One morning the temperature dropped to fifty-nine degrees below zero, almost a record.

Men cracked the stock joke of the West, that the whites had made a mistake in taking the country from the Indians, and that it should be promptly returned. At the same time they took a perverse pride in the behaviour of the thermometer.

"Gateway's the coldest place in the Dominion," said Harvey Potts, the local amateur meteorologist. "Of course, Dawson City—but Dawson's different. They talk about the 'Peg, but it's got nothin' on us, only the winds. Them down-easters don't know what cold is."

Business was very quiet, but creditors were noisy enough. To Dick rubbing along as best he could, and looking forward to Isenberg's next payment to lift him out of the hole,

it seemed that every mail brought duns, and every train a collector.

It was a relief to him when a series of terrific storms tied up railroad traffic into the town for four days, but the first train that got through brought a bushel of duns and two instalment collectors.

All his energies seemed paralysed by an evil spell, he could think of nothing but Molly. As Con's star rose his own declined. He haunted the McLay house abjectly. Alexander was coldly rude to him, though Mrs. McLay, a fellow sufferer from Molly's callous selfishness, was kind to him in a resigned and hopeless way.

The bibulous Bob White, left very largely to his own devices when Dick took Molly driving in the afternoons, went rapidly down the hill. His trips to the Imperial for a little bracer, a touch of something for the cold, or just a nip because he felt so tough, grew more frequent and of longer duration. The store was often left wholly untenanted.

For a long time Dick had not the heart to check him. He fell, too, into the habit of stealing small sums of money that he received from customers instead of putting it in the cash drawer. Dick did not even suspect that.

He came to live in a kind of galvanic coma. On his return from the Palace or the Imperial, he would prop himself up behind the counter in a totally speechless state, and people coming into the store would see him there looking like a stuffed image with glass eyes, unable to hear, see or move. It did business no good.

In a way it was unfortunate for Dick that he lived with his mother. She found her annuity of fifty dollars a month ample for her simple tastes, and would have scouted with

indignation the idea that her son should pay for his board. It was only in connection with the ever-receptive Molly that Dick found the lack of ready cash really distressing. Bluebird also continued to run up a stable bill that had to be regularly met.

He thought earnestly and long of selling her, but she had come to be almost his only hold on Molly. To sell Bluebird was to declare himself out of the running and abandon the field to Con.

And Molly grew kinder to him, in her indolent indifferent way she could be very charming when she chose. She went driving with him often in the red cutter, and listened to his pleas with a mild air, though she would never give him a definite answer.

He drew comfort from that, believing that his devotion would eventually find its way to her heart. In truth, his sun had all but set; she had nearly made up her mind that she would never marry him. She liked him, and a woman can afford to be kinder to a suitor she has definitely made up her mind to reject than to one about whom she is still in doubt. Also she regarded him as her property: even if she did not require him herself she was far from prepared to resign him to anyone else.

Finally, she could use him as a club to keep Con in order. She was not at all satisfied with Con; in her heart she neither liked nor trusted him, and though she was too lazy to think much about anything, she had privately decided that she would not marry him if she saw any prospect of a better match. In the meantime, she saw no reason why she should not accept his presents.

Dick continued to see a good deal of Jessie Jenifree. She displayed the peculiarity of being always somewhere in

the vicinity, always mildly cheerful, always interested, always sympathetic. She listened to his troubles without obtruding any of her own, and she appeared to expect nothing of him, and that, in his impoverished condition, was no inconsiderable matter.

Comparisons between the two girls would force themselves upon him. He felt that in Jessie he would have a loyal, helpful, unselfish companion; in Molly a luxurious, idle, extravagant, imperious mistress. But he could not help feeling an uneasy suspicion that he was being hunted. It was most unobtrusively done, but it had continued so long that even he, and he was not a particularly vain man, could not help seeing that Jessie would marry him if she could.

In one of his fits of despondency, after a peculiarly trying day with an exigent collector, a drunken Bob White, and a debtor whom he caught sneaking into Isenberg's, he decided to give Molly up. He had not been given to moods of depression until lately, but he had fallen into the habit of indulging in a bout of the blues as other men do in a debauch of whiskey.

Having passed his blighted prospects in review and worked himself into the requisite state of sodden self-pity, he told himself that Molly would never love him, and that Jessie was really the only person in the world who cared for him. He did not love her, but then he was no more capable of love. Life had no longer any value for him, but he could at least make Jessie happy. Fickle Molly had broken his heart, and he would generously bestow the shattered fragments on a girl who would be glad to get them. And besides, a malicious sprite whispered to him, it would be a noble revenge on Molly: she had thought him so securely chained to her chariot.

He called upon Jessie, and she received him with evident pleasure. There was invitation in her usually calm eyes and a pleasant tremulousness about her prim little mouth.

But, alas, she was suffering from a cold in the head and she had a pimple on her chin. A man demands absolute perfection in a woman he does not love. A pimple on Molly's chin would have pained him for her sake ; Molly with the snuffles would have been pathetic. But in Jessie these blemishes were annoying, sentiment was impossible in their presence, and he discovered an extreme reluctance to kissing her.

He decided that he would postpone his declaration of love until she was in a more fit state to receive it. There was no hurry and no urge. He did not despise Jessie ; he had a genuine and profound respect for her character and virtues ; but a woman to be had for the taking lacks zest. A man only flies to open arms when he has been ignominiously cast out elsewhere, and Dick had not yet been cast out.

So the declaration went unspoken. Jessie had lost a good deal of her habitual cheerfulness when he left her that evening, and there was reproach in her eyes when he said goodbye. He had the grace to feel a little ashamed of himself.

But Molly was Molly and incomparable ; he even felt a sort of perverse and gloomy pleasure in the thought of ruining himself for her sake. Jessie had soothed and comforted him, and his depression was passing. This was her reward.

* * *

Golden's cough grew steadily worse. She was seldom at the rink, and Pearly often had to stay at home to nurse

her. But she was given an occasional evening off from her manifold duties as housekeeper, cook and sick nurse, and she and Dick met with frank satisfaction on both sides.

He was sorry for her, she seemed such a child to have so heavy a burden laid upon her, and he grew highly indignant with Con and Golden when he thought about it. Northern girls are often slow to develop, and Pearly at eighteen was still immature looking.

He did not dream that he was encountering a remarkable personality, in whom all the fire and passion of the Gates clan, without its callous greed, was ruled by a firm and temperate will. She had known suffering in plenty and had learnt to suffer in silence.

When she had left that gloomy house of sickness and suspicion and hate behind her, she resolutely put aside her troubles and was gay.

"A nice kid," said Dick in his blindness, "not a bit like the rest of the Gates gang. Just full of fun. Oh well, she don't know what a tough old world this is."

* * *

The egregious Newt Hokum cropped up again in an amazing transformation. He came, not like a hungry dog begging a bone, but like a conqueror. He bore in his hands a sack.

"Well, sir, how the devil are you?" he shouted jovially. "Got a few pelts here, prime pelts, boy. Muskrat, skunk, fox, mink. Look 'em over. I brung 'em in to you first. What I says, I says, use them white as uses you white. Yes sir, that's me every time."

Dick turned to Bob with a triumphant twinkle in his eye, but Bob was not impressed.

"Let's look at 'em," he said mistrustfully, and emptied the sack on the floor.

He was busy sorting and examining the pelts for some minutes while Newt, watching him suspiciously out of the tail of his eye, feigned to maintain a loud and facetious conversation with Dick.

"I told you I'd square up, Mr. Black. You thought I'd skipped the country. He-he-he. No sir, when the winter come, I out with my old traps an' got busy. Furs ain't common like they used to be a few years ago, but there ain't much you can learn Newton Hokum about trappin' no sir. If they're there I'll get 'em, you bet."

He described how cunningly he had outwitted the mink, and how he had over-reached the fox.

"Sixty-four mushrat," said Bob in an inexorable voice. "Thirty of 'em ain't prime. Give you six dollars for the lot. The mink's off-colour—two dollars is the best we can do. The fox is pretty fair but small—a dollar seventy-five for that. No market at all for skunk just now, an' the hide ain't been scraped; there's a quarter-inch of fat on it. We'd sooner you'd take it home again."

Newt swallowed, licked his lips, blinked and swallowed again.

"Ain't you goin' to give me no more than nine seventy-five for the whole lot?" he inquired mournfully. "You know, that ain't usin' me right."

"It's a fair price," answered Bob sternly. "You won't get better no place in town."

Dick retired into the background, but the cunning Newt had fathomed his weakness.

"Make it a even ten dollars?" he appealed. "Now, that's fair, ain't it?"

Bob White fixed an admonitory eye upon his employer. Dick hastily changed the subject. "I'll look up your account, Newt," he said.

"Oh, never mind, never mind," said Newt magnanimously. "I know that's all right, any figures you'll have'll be the right ones. Just give me credit for ten dollars an' let me take a few things, eh? It don't matter to a few cents either way."

In the upshot he retreated triumphantly with flour, sugar, tea, lard, and the inevitable plug of chewing tobacco.

"Huh," grunted Bob, gazing after him, "he owes you just about as much now as he did when he come in."

* * *

Though he was now confident that the little remittance man had been too drunk at the time to recollect anything of their encounter on Christmas Eve, Con had been at some pains to keep out of his way. Nor did Cracker seek him out.

But they met face to face one afternoon in mid-March. Cracker was alone, painfully sober, and in a doleful mood. His remittance was not due for a week, and as his habit was at such times, he was doing his best to negotiate a small loan, or at the least to cadge a free drink. But his methods were too well known in town and nobody would lend him a penny. With the lumberjacks still up in the woods, and business very dull, free drinks in Gateway were no commoner than orchids.

At sight of Con his watery eyes brightened, and a confused train of memory stirred in his muddled brain, sharpened by enforced sobriety. Just when and where he had seen the miller last was not quite clear to him, but it was in some way connected with Christmas.

Con could not avoid him, but he drew down his brows in a forbidding frown and was about to pass him with a curt nod.

"Hullo, Father Christmas," said Cracker with a propitiatory smile.

The effect of his words startled him, for Con turned on him with a murderous snarl, all the colour gone from his face and his eyes glaring. Cracker did not understand himself what had prompted him to give so peculiar a greeting, or why it had so potent an effect. He was alarmed and in his alarm he babbled out the first words that occurred to him.

"Sorry, old man, but, I say, could you let me have a fiver until next week? Deuced hard up, stony in fact, but my confounded remittance will be here next week and I'll pay you back, on my honour."

Equally to his amazement and delight, Con fumbled silently in his pocket and drew out a five dollar bill.

"Now, keep your damn mouth shut, or I'll shut it for you," he threatened, thrusting his ugly lower jaw into Cracker's shrinking face.

"Yes, yes, mum's the word," quavered the remittance man, nodding and winking rapidly. "Thanks awfully, old man, I won't forget. You'll have it back as soon as my remittance gets here. Ta-ta."

He left Con wondering how much he knew and to what use he would put his knowledge. A bold front might have saved him this piece of blackmail, but he had been taken by surprise. Now he was absolutely at Cracker's mercy, and would have to submit. The dark shadow of the penitentiary, which had retreated so far into the background he had almost forgotten it, suddenly fell right across his path.

As for Cracker, with bold eyes and erect back he marched into the Palace bar and ordered a whiskey and soda.

"Yeah," drawled the bartender. "Got any money?"

Cracker slapped the five down on the mahogany and grinned. "None of your blasted insolence, young feller me lad, trot out the bugjuice."

Colonel Robert Lee Long heard the news and was mightily interested in his friend's amazing success in raising the wind in a dead calm. Late winter was always a very lean season for the Colonel, and he pressed Cracker earnestly for the name of his benefactor, with a view to negotiating a small loan himself.

But the worthy baronet could be reticent when he wished. It was a long time since he had pondered anything but ways and means to secure free liquor, and the unusual effort made his head ache. He had never succeeded in obtaining anything from Con before, and it was evident even to him that there was something more than met the eye in his sudden generosity. Among the fading memories of his decaying brain he searched diligently, but it was not until some one let drop a chance remark in his presence about the mysterious burglary of Holm's store, that a ray of light illuminated the puzzle.

He was jubilant. Here was manna in the wilderness, but also need for discretion. In jail, Con's value was nil; at large he would remain an ever-flowing fountain of beneficence for the man who knew his secret. But if too many drank at the fountain it would soon run dry. Cracker decided to keep his own counsel.

He evolved a method as cunning as it was effective. When he encountered Con in his strolls about town, and Con could not always avoid him in so small a place, he

would make a sign and brush by with an open hand held close to his side. Con would slip a bill into his fingers and pass on. Cracker, after a further stroll, would drop in at some bar.

If Con avoided him too long by keeping off the street altogether, he would walk up and down past the mill, and his victim would not be long in coming out.

It drove the Colonel almost insane. He possessed all the finest instincts of the blackmailer himself, but his talents were being wasted for lack of use. Cracker at his drunkenest replied to questions the most subtle and searching only with a maddening wink.

It had a bad effect on Con too ; he revolved ways and means of ridding himself of the remittance man. Cracker had some inkling of that, and he became careful not to stray into dark places after nightfall. When he came unexpectedly upon Con at dusk one day, he let out a faint shriek of " Help " and fled on trembling legs.

* * *

But apart from the annoying drains upon his purse made by Golden and Cracker, Con prospered. Luck remained with him. The North-Western mill suffered a breakdown, and it was some weeks before machinery for repairs could be brought all the way from Eastern Canada. Con filled his own elevator to the brim and sold flour as fast as he could grind it.

The Winnipeg grain market, after a period of sharp fluctuations, was rising slowly but steadily, and his profits daily augmented, on paper at any rate.

He was no more satisfied than any gambler ever is, but his confidence in his judgment, as he was pleased to consider it, daily increased and with it increased his arrogance.

Only to Golden and Cracker did he any longer deign to be civil, Molly always excepted. It irked him extremely, and he observed with unholy satisfaction that Golden's condition grew worse daily. The doctor advised removal to a milder climate, but she could not bear to be parted from Dick, little though she now saw of him. She maintained stubbornly that her cough would get better as soon as spring arrived.

Con, listening to the terrible fits of coughing that racked her at times, thought to himself that she and his secret would soon be buried together. If Golden went, he decided, he would not permit Cracker long to survive her, and then he would be perfectly safe.

With Molly, his relations were often strained. She was restive, and even his numerous and costly gifts hardly reconciled her to the tone he frequently took. She grew more than ever reluctant to marry him, but an open break was still delayed by the passion of the one and the greed of the other.

CHAPTER VIII

CRACKER'S domestic arrangements were of a peculiar nature. On his first arrival in Gateway he alternated between periods, very short, of great prosperity, and periods, weeks long, of utter destitution.

For three days after the receipt of his remittance he would be royally drunk, but thereafter distressingly sober and often in actual need of food. He slept during these famine periods in the lofts of livery barns among the hay, earning an occasional meal or drink by assisting with the horses.

But Henry Buff, proprietor of the Palace Hotel, was a man of considerable financial acumen. He studied Cracker's case and made him a suggestion. For twenty-five dollars a month, paid strictly in advance, he would furnish board and room. That would leave Cracker twenty-five a month for liquor and incidentals.

The proposal was tactfully made to the baronet on a frosty November morning, four days before his remittance was due. Cracker, in rags, blue with cold and staggering with hunger, had crept into the hotel lobby for warmth. He had not had a drink or a smoke for five days. He caught at the offer with an enthusiasm the more eager for Buff's invitation to seal the bargain with a drink on the house.

The arrangement began forthwith, but by the second

day it was apparent to Sir William that something was wanting. Drinks had not been specified in the bond, and, though fed and warm, his thirst remained an unquenched torment.

The bartender turned a frosty eye upon his suggestion that a small charge account should be permitted a permanent guest. No argument served to convince Buff either, though he offered to include in the bargain, for the further sum of three dollars per month, also payable strictly in advance, one drink of whiskey per day upon demand. In consideration of another free drink on the spot, Cracker assented to this also.

On the day his remittance arrived, and on every such day thereafter, Buff accompanied his guest to the bank and received his twenty-eight dollars. Cracker hastened forth with the remainder to irrigate the desert soil of his existence and to cultivate thereon the gorgeous but short-lived flowers of intoxication.

During the succeeding drought it became the baronet's major purpose in life to secure an extra drink or two as often as he could, and to this end he applied all the mental powers that remained to him.

Having received his daily ration at the hands of one bartender, he would wait until the relief came on duty.

Then he would stroll into the bar and remark casually, "Oh, by Jove, I forgot my drink this morning. I'll have it now, if you don't mind, old man."

It seldom worked more than once with new bartenders, but the remittance man had other devices. One was to pretend that another man had invited him to take a drink and had paid for it. This was sometimes effective on busy days. Still another was to hasten into the bar,

joy irradiating his countenance, and announce that he had just obtained Buff's permission to receive an extra drink.

It was a game with an element of sportsmanship in it, and he enjoyed scoring a point as much as enjoyed the drink it brought him. He welcomed a new and unsuspecting bartender with delight. But bartenders are wary folk, and his successes were few.

When all else failed, he invoked the spirit of pure charity for a very sick man. The refusal of a paltry drink of whiskey to a man in his extremity, he would point out, was an act of wanton cruelty. But that is an old story in all bars, and is seldom effective.

Then would Cracker denounce and deplore the soulless greed of hotel keepers and bartenders in general, with particular reference to the rapacity of Buff and his myrmidons, and vow that he would terminate the arrangement at the end of the month and take his valuable patronage elsewhere.

He did so once, but was so ill-advised as to choose a particularly raw and chilly April. His remittance being all spent and his warm bed exchanged for a draughty hayloft, he speedily repented. He approached Buff for reinstatement, but the stony-hearted host merely grinned and held out his hand with a demand for twenty-eight dollars in cash.

Cracker shed tears of indignation, and sought the proprietors of the Imperial Hotel and the Gateway House. They were willing to furnish board, room, and one drink a day on the same terms as Buff—cash strictly in advance, and the negotiations got no further. Cracker spent an excessively lean and frost-bitten month.

Three days before the May remittance was due,

the astute and diplomatic Buff relented. The half-dead baronet could not afford to stand on his dignity and took the proffered peace drink with tears of gratitude, and the old arrangement endured unchanged thereafter.

* * *

It was Con's liberality which terminated it, for it enabled the baronet to consume considerably more than his customary allowance of liquor, and he was in the full tide of intoxication when his remittance arrived.

The resultant spree was too much for his weakened constitution and he had to take to his bed. Dr. Thoms gave it as his opinion that Sir William Quigley, Bart., was about to step out of a world which he had not conspicuously adorned into the great problem beyond.

The news put Colonel Robert Lee Long almost beside himself. It was unbearable that Cracker should pass out bearing with him his auriferous secret, and the Colonel laid all his other duties on the altar of friendship and nursed the dying baronet with touching devotion. Cracker repaid him with disgusting ingratitude, refusing utterly to name his purveyor of free drinks.

He sank rapidly and was often in great pain. He was not a fretful or exacting patient, however, bearing his final illness with more fortitude than he had ever borne health and prosperity.

On an afternoon in April he was very low. The spring was well advanced, a soft warm wind blew in at the open window, bearing with it the fragrance of an awakening earth. The baronet seemed to be wandering in his mind, and the Colonel listened eagerly to his mutterings.

Presently he opened eyes that had the light of under-

standing in them and smiled feebly. "Well, old man, I don't think I'll be long now," he said. "What?"

"Oh no," said the Colonel, "you'll come around all right."

Cracker moved his head slightly in dissent, and seemed to be listening to a robin that was gurgling melodiously in a poplar outside the window.

"Well, have it your own way," conceded the Colonel. "But if you've made up your mind you're agoin' to cash in, you'd ought to tip me off, as a friend, to the feller you been touchin' these last few weeks an' what you got on him. I been a pretty good friend to you, ain't I?"

To this pathetic appeal Cracker returned no immediate answer, but he presently remarked inconsequently, "I used to be a gentleman."

The Colonel did not catch his drift. "I don't see what that has to do with it?" he said fretfully.

"You wouldn't," replied the baronet with a fleeting smile.

"See here," said the Colonel heatedly, "I'm just as much of a gentleman as what you are."

"Precisely," agreed Cracker with another enigmatic smile.

"Well, but lookahere," argued the Colonel, and entered into a long and not very lucid exposition on the duty of the remittance man not to leave the world without at least bequeathing his secret to the best friend he had in the world.

He desisted only when he found his audience had wandered off into the shadow land that lies on the edge of the dark country. He babbled meaninglessly, and the Colonel stared at him with a frown, feeling an

earnest desire to hit his dear friend on the head with a brick.

"Father Christmas," said Cracker suddenly and chuckled, "bally old Father Christmas."

"Who?" inquired the Colonel.

"Gates," came the unexpected reply, "ghastly boulder, Gates, perfectly putrid." He lapsed into mumblings.

The Colonel was not a man of deeply analytical mind; he had, in fact, no more intelligence than was necessary to play the Southern Colonel of cheap melodrama with indifferent success and to fleece drunken lumberjacks at poker and pool. He lived by his wits, but his wits had never provided him with more than the most precarious existence.

So he was completely baffled. He shook Cracker not at all gently, and threatened him with bodily violence, but the remittance man went on babbling about nothing. The Colonel sat down to wait.

The long northern twilight deepened into dusk, and still Cracker raved, and still the Colonel sat patiently by the bed. In spite of himself he dozed off at last.

He was awakened by hearing Cracker say something in a loud voice. The baronet was sitting up in bed, a smile on his lips and a happy light in his wide blue eyes.

"Well, Jerry, I guess I'll have my drink now," he said in a cheery and confident tone.

Then he choked, put his hand to his throat, and fell back upon his pillow.

The Colonel was left alone with what appeared an insoluble problem.

* * *

Buff showed unexpected humanity. Cracker had left

nothing, not even a good name, and in ordinary circumstances a pauper's grave would have been his lot. But the hotelkeeper made himself chargeable for the funeral, officiating, very appropriately, as chief mourner, supported by the Colonel. Certainly no one else had so much cause to regret the baronet's passing.

Buff earned a good deal of commendation for his generosity until it leaked out that he had sent in a very stiff bill for expenses to the new baronet in England. He received a remittance in full, but his suggestion in regard to a tombstone was ignored. Cracker remained in an unmarked grave, and doubtless rested none the worse.

The Colonel did not lack audacity ; it was a necessity of his profession. He knew, at least, the name of the man Cracker had successfully blackmailed, even if he could not guess at the secret knowledge that made it possible. It pained him exceedingly to think that any easy money should escape him, and he decided that perhaps a bold bluff might serve.

Accordingly with an outward confidence he was far from feeling, he walked into Con's dusty office two days after the funeral. Con was deep in the blue-prints of his proposed new mill, and with his usual ill-breeding did not trouble to look up.

The Colonel settled himself in a broken chair and coughed importantly. No notice being taken, he coughed again.

" Well, what do you want ? " inquired Con rudely.

" I have come, sir," said the Colonel with dignity, " to see you in connection with my poor friend Sir William Quigley, Bart."

" You have, eh ? Well ? "

The Colonel was discouraged, but not yet routed.

"Your relations with him was very close, sir, you gave him financial assistance, very considerable financial assistance. He took me into his confidence before he died, sir, quite fully into his confidence."

Con stared at him coolly. He had once been taken by surprise and he did not mean to be so again. He had never been certain just how much Cracker knew, and had not deemed it wise to show too much interest. He had maintained the fiction, Cracker acquiescing, that the money passing between them was simply in the nature of small temporary loans given to oblige a needy friend.

He was not inclined to take the same course with the Colonel until he was certain the man possessed dangerous knowledge. So he opposed to the assault a barrier of silence.

After a pause the Colonel resumed less confidently, "Yes sir, he took me into his confidence, sir. Now, as I happen to be temporarily embarrassed in a financial way, sir, and bein', as I said, in full possession of the late Sir William Quigley Bart's confidence, I come to you, sir, in the expectation that you will make me a small loan."

"You've got your nerve right with you."

This was not auspicious. The Colonel tried bluster.

"Lookahere, Mr. Gates," he said sternly, "I'd like for you to be a little more civil. I don't have to take that talk from you, sir, I got ways of makin' you feel sorry if I like to take 'em."

"Oh?"

"Yes sir, I have, sir. When I tell you my poor friend Sir William Quigley, Bart., died in my arms, tellin' me everything, everything, sir, with his dyin' breath, maybe sir, you'll come down off your perch."

"Did he tell you the name of the woman?" inquired Con blandly.

The Colonel's eyes bulged. He had not connected the secret with a woman, and he was taken aback. He coughed to hide his confusion.

"Or of the horse?" mocked Con.

The Colonel was further mystified, and rolled his eyes helplessly.

"I don't need to tell you what he told me," he floundered. "You know as well as I do, sir. You can't put me off like that, no sir, you can't do it. If I was to go an' tell around this town what he told me, sir, you wouldn't like it a little bit."

"Get out of here, you big four-flusher," said Con contemptuously. "You can't tell anything because there's nothing to tell, an' Cracker told you nothing because he hadn't anything to tell either. I was easy enough to let him bum me for a few dollars, an' you thought he had something on me. Now, get to hell out of here, you miserable crook, or I'll throw you out, an' if I hear of you defamin' me around town, I'll land you behind the bars so quick you'll think you was always there. Beat it, I'm busy."

"You'll hear more about this, sir," mumbled the Colonel, getting up and moving to the door. "You can't get away with a raw deal like this, sir, I'm tellin' you."

But Con had his nose deep in the blue-prints again, and the baffled Colonel found himself in the street and penniless.

* * *

Con leant back in his chair and laughed. It was seldom he laughed at all, and then only when some one had suffered at his hands. At the moment he felt that he had got the

best of everyone and had therefore the best of reasons for laughter. Luck and good judgment combined to do him honour.

At a crisis in his career, Bullpuncher had obligingly permitted himself to be frozen to death. His father had considerably passed from the scene at the moment when it was most desirable for him to do so. Cracker, the only man he had real reason to fear had tactfully elected to take the same journey and carry his secret with him.

It was true Golden knew, but she dare not betray him for her own sake.

When he looked abroad all things wore the same rosy hue. Wheat continued to climb, he had spread his margins thin and his paper profits mounted steadily.

Molly was coming within his grasp at last. All Gateway knew that Dick Black was in financial difficulties, and he was no longer a serious rival. Though Molly showed a perverse reluctance to casting him off, he felt sure she would not countenance him long in face of his inevitable bankruptcy, and there was no other rival in sight.

He decided that the time had arrived to come to grips with Molly. She was not going to be allowed to keep him trotting at her heels like a lapdog on a leash; the thought of it was a humiliation of his arrogance that made him grind his teeth.

He would marry her, and when he had married her he would teach the saucy wench her place; he would repay her flouting with interest. He had a pleasant vision of her upon her knees begging him to be kind to her. He had a suspicion in the back of his mind that it would take a very great deal to force Molly to her knees, but it was pleasant to indulge the dream.

It was in this frame of mind, therefore, that he drove his car round to her house in the afternoon. She had not been out with Dick that day, for Dick was in the country trying to stir up some of his delinquent debtors, and she was glad to see Con.

She made herself ready with her usual deliberation, while the impatient Con fumed without. He decided that this was another bad habit he would break her of when they were married. It requires an optimist to believe he can cure a woman of time wasting.

She came out at last in a long dustcoat with a white fluffy veil tied over her towering hat and under her chin. She was taking no more chances of losing her hair, and motoring veils were the fashion just then.

Con could not talk very much when he was driving. Spring trails in the West are bad, and there were large mudholes to be negotiated at intervals. There were also teams of outraged horses to be met, driven by indignant drivers, and he usually had to stop the car to let them go by.

But as they went along he bestowed on her out of the corner of his mouth a series of remarks designed to enhance his own prestige and put her in a favourable frame of mind. He told her he had definitely decided to build a new mill bigger than the North-Western and a new and bigger house than the one he occupied. He also hinted that a more up-to-date car would soon be on the way to him.

Molly loved listening to such conversation; talk of money always had an hypnotic effect on her; she detested people who were poor or unfortunate. The few comments she made in answer had a purring quality about them, like

a sleepy cat before a warm fire being gently tickled under the chin.

When he judged she was in a sufficiently receptive mood, he stopped the car and opened his attack with his usual abruptness.

"Well, Moll, what do you say about it? Goin' to marry me now?"

"O Con, I wish you wouldn't bother me so," she parried.

"This is the last time I will bother you," he told her grimly, "I've had about enough. You can't keep me dangle on a string like a fishworm any longer. What more do you want? I can fix you up as well as any woman in Gateway, and if things go well there'll be a lot better to come in a little while."

"Well, but I don't want to get married yet."

"How soon will you be ready to get married then?"

"I don't know, I haven't made up my mind."

"Molly, you're about enough to drive a man bughouse. Can't you think up any other excuse? You've been tellin' me that same old yarn for a year and a half. If you haven't made up your mind yet it's about time you did. I've got to have an answer one way or the other."

"I hate to hurt Dickie Black's feelings, he's crazy about me."

"Well, that is a new one anyway. To the devil with Dick an' his feelings. He's flat broke anyway an' he'll be out in the street by fall. He's been tryin' to make a big splash an' he didn't have the money to do it."

"Is it as bad as that?" she asked in surprise.

"Don't believe me, ask anybody you like; they'll all tell you he's on the rocks. He ain't been payin' attention to

his business, an' that clerk of his has been robbin' him right an' left. Dick's down an' out."

"Oh, poor Dickie, I'm sorry," she murmured.

"It's his own fault, he was tryin' to be a big man on the cheap an' went broke at it," growled Con. "I don't know why you need waste any sympathy on him."

"But he's such a nice fellow, everybody likes him."

"Huh, nice fellow maybe, but he's been too big for his boots an' it's landed him in the soup. It's comin' to him."

"I don't think you have any heart, Con."

"Sure I have a heart, if I didn't I wouldn't be so crazy over you. But I haven't much sympathy to spare for anybody that comes between us, an' that's what he's been doin'. I'll say I'm sorry if it'll do you any good, but I'd be a lot sorrier if he got you instead of me."

The argument seemed to have weight with her. "You do love me, Con?"

"Great gosh, what have I been tellin' you every day for a year an' more?"

"Yes, I believe you do—and you'll try and make me happy?"

"Well, of course, do you think I want to make you miserable?"

"You're so rough sometimes."

"Can't help it, it's my nature, but I don't mean much by it. Things get my goat sometimes and I fly off the handle, but I'm not really a bad fellow; if I'm handled right I'm easy enough to get along with."

She shivered a little in the chill that had come with sunset. "Con. I'm cold an' it's gettin' late. Let's go back."

"Not till you give me your answer," he replied stubbornly. "What's it to be now?"

" Oh, I can't give you an answer to-night."

" When, then ? "

" I don't know."

" Come on, say when, I've waited long enough ? "

" Well, the end of the week."

" All right, mind, I'll hold you to it, Saturday afternoon."

They drove home, both very thoughtful and very silent.

In the days of grace allowed her, Molly made private inquiries and learnt that Dick was indeed supposed to be on the brink of ruin. She was as sorry for it as it was in her nature to be for anyone but herself, but she realised at once that she could not throw Con over to marry a penniless man. Since Con would wait no longer, Dick would have to be thrown over.

We can usually call upon some sort of moral feeling to support us in our meanest actions, and a woman naturally despises a poor suitor. Molly soon began to feel a virtuous indignation at Dick for having come courting her under false pretences, a beggar on horseback.

Con, whose magnificence was genuine, and founded on the possession of ready cash, appeared the brighter by contrast, and our affections always have a strong tendency to jump with our interests. Molly felt more kindly toward Con than she had ever done.

She knew that she was taking a risk with his savage temper in marrying him, but she had plenty of courage and did not doubt her ability to cope with him.

So when he came to call for her on the Saturday she had her answer ready, but was reluctant to give it. While she could hold it suspended over his head like a whiplash, she could keep him submissive, but she did not know what effect an acceptance would have on him.

Still, when he stopped the car on a quiet spot on the prairie out of sight of the trail, and turned on her with eyes like hot coals and his blue chin sticking out, she knew she could delay no longer.

"Well, Moll?"

She smiled at him tantalizingly. "If you look at me like that, I won't," she drawled. "My you're bossy, if I married you would I ever have a word to say?"

"Yes, yes, of course you would," he said entreatingly. "Molly, I'm not really such a hard man, I wouldn't be bad to you. Say you'll marry me, now do."

"Oh, well, I guess I'll have to, I don't seem able to get shut of you."

She closed her eyes and surrendered herself, not altogether unwillingly, to his arms.

Yet they were both rather silent as they drove home. She reflected that this man would take some handling, and she was too indolent to enjoy the thought of a perpetual conflict of wills. He, for all his exultation at having won her, was nevertheless resolving that he himself would be the only master in the house.

It remained to inform Dick and the world, and they discussed the matter briefly at her door.

"I'm goin' to spread this all around town," he said with a grin.

She shook her head. "It's a girl's business to announce her engagement," she corrected.

"Well, go ahead an' announce it; let's go in an' tell your mother for a start."

Half reluctantly she acquiesced. Mrs. McLay congratulated him sadly, while Margaret stared with wide-eyed disapproval from the background. She had always hated

him, for he had consistently ignored her, while Dick had always been kind to her in a brotherly way.

The grim Alexander was away over-reaching simple-minded Indians, and Mrs. McLay had no suggestions to offer until her imperious master made his will known. But Molly was of age, and it mattered nothing to Con whether he approved or not.

* * *

News travels fast in a little town. Margaret had passed the word over the fence to a girl neighbour before Con's car had panted out of sight. Mrs. McLay, with a juicy piece of gossip under her tongue for the first time in many moons, had to walk down the street and communicate it to Mrs. McKenzie.

Mrs. McKenzie was one of those women every community holds, who know everything and tell everything. Every woman in Gateway and a good many of the men had heard the news before bedtime. It remained for the one most concerned not to learn it until Sunday morning.

"I hear that Molly McLay is goin' to marry Con Gates," said Mrs. Black at breakfast.

Dick pricked up his ears at the mention of Molly's name. "What's that, ma?"

She repeated her words.

"Don't believe it," said Dick with a sinking heart.

"Well, it's all over town. Mrs. Chindall told me, an' Mrs. Upstar, an' then I heard it from Mrs. Bivins. I'm kind of glad of it—that McLay girl ain't no wife for you—an' now you won't waste no more time on her. Now you've throwed her over, you can go on an' marry that nice Jenifree girl—I've had my eye on her a long while. It's

gettin' along about time you did marry, an' you was just wastin' your time with that McLay girl"

Dick got up and left the room. He did not wish to believe the news, and yet he had felt a difference in Molly's attitude toward him in the last days, a difference so subtle he could not analyze it, but which had made his heart contract with foreboding.

He could not get at Molly direct that morning; there was no telephone in the McLay house and she was in the habit of using a neighbour's. He had to take his mother to church in the morning, and the Anglican and Presbyterian churches lay some distance apart. There was no meeting possible until afternoon. By tacit agreement, this was his Sunday afternoon for taking Molly out.

No one said anything to him about the engagement at church, but he noted significant glances passing between people in the knots that always gathered about the door before and after service. He tried to preserve a wooden face.

When he drove up to Molly's door after lunch, she did not come out. It was Margaret who appeared.

"Molly's not feelin' so well this afternoon," she said in a hurried shamefaced way, looking down and twisting her work-roughened hands together. "She can't come out."

"Can I go in and see her?" pleaded Dick.

"Well, I don't know, I guess if you want."

He hitched Bluebird to the fence and went in. Margaret scurried into the kitchen and there was no sign of Mrs. McLay. Molly met him with a perfectly impassive face.

"Can't you come out this afternoon, Moll? It's a nice day—not much wind—not cold at all," he stammered. "There's something I particularly want to ask you."

"I can't come this afternoon," she said coldly.

"Then it is true?"

She lifted her fine eyebrows at him.

"That you're goin' to marry Con Gates?"

"Yes," in a calm voice.

He gazed at her entreatingly, but her face had never looked so much like one carved from delicately tinted marble, or her eyes held so much of the chilly gleam of new ice under a winter sun. He saw his dream dissolve and float away. He had an impulse to fling himself at her feet for mercy, followed by one of hot reproach. He repressed them both, for he realized that they were useless.

"O Moll, and I loved you so," was all he said.

He walked dazedly out to the mare, unhitched her, climbed into the buggy and gave her her head. He drove unseeingly through the country for miles, mechanically avoiding the few other vehicles he encountered, mechanically answering the customary greetings of the drivers.

He was like a man who has been hit a heavy blow on the head, a prey to a confusion of mind and of purpose such as he had never known in his life. He was unable to come to any definite decision, or even at times to realize just what had happened.

It was not until he had driven Bluebird into a deep mudhole in the darkness, where the buggy lurched dangerously among stumps, that he came out of his daze. He extricated the mare, getting himself wet to the waist in the process, and drove home, arriving with a beaten horse sometime after midnight.

He arrived at the store at nine in the morning. His eyes were bloodshot, and swollen and he had not slept all night.

Like some idol worshipper who has seen the dread image of his adoration fall from its pedestal and break into a thousand fragments, he was hardly able to realize that he had worshipped a sham. He grieved over Molly as over a loved one dead. The Molly he had listened to the day before, was not the Molly he had loved, but a changeling.

To every man must come the awakening sooner or later, when he discovers his goddess is only a woman. In that shattering moment his eyes are opened for ever. It rests with the woman whether he shall learn to love her over again as a woman, or whether he shall cast her out as a spurious thing. Already Dick was setting about sweeping the pollution out of the temple where the broken goddess lay in fragments.

The sight of his store, unswept, the stock piled anyhow on the dusty shelves, Bob White sprawled with his head and shoulders on the counter, dozing off a hang-over, gave him another shock. It almost seemed to him that he saw these things for the first time.

The malignant spell of a ruinous infatuation had been lifted by the witch who cast it : she had been merciful to that extent. He was able once more to look at uncomely realities with open eyes. It was very bitter medicine, but wholesome.

His time of testing had come. It was doubtful whether he would escape ruin in any case, but there was the barest chance. He had been in doubt whether to give up or to fight, but the sight of his store woke the combative instinct in him.

He shook Bob by the shoulder. " Here, wake up," he said in a tone he had never used to the man before. " This

place is like a hogpen. Get busy with that broom, I'm just about fed up with you and your ways."

Bob lifted a heavy head and blinked bleared eyes at him. He rose slowly, shuffled off and got his broom, and fell to sweeping in a feeble manner that merely stirred up the deep layer of dust on the floor.

"Oh, go and sit down," said Dick, snatching the broom from him.

He swept that store as it had not been swept since the days of its founder. Next he attacked the untidy shelves and produced some sort of order among them. Bob sat on an empty evaporated apple box and regarded him with stupid puzzlement.

"Brace up and wait on customers," snapped Dick. "And next time you come in here, wash your face first, you're dirty."

With a last snort of indignation and disgust, he charged into his office and dragged out his neglected ledgers. His desk was covered with unsorted charge slips, invoices, statements, duns. He plunged into the thick of them, sorting and arranging, with knitted brows and intent eyes.

All day he worked busily, but order had hardly begun to emerge out of the chaos when evening came. He went home tired out. His mother talked to him, but he did not hear her. He kept his mind resolutely on his business; he would not permit himself to think of Molly, who lay like a raw wound deep in his consciousness, an unremitting ache.

Still resolutely battling with figures in his mind, he went to bed and fell sound asleep. In the morning his mind was clearer and his resolution stronger. He could look ugly facts in the face.

He must have done with Molly. He had no grounds for an angry scene with her. His reproaches would only lay him open to her ridicule. To continue to play the part of a stray cur slinking at her heels in the hope of casual scraps of attention was out of the question. Molly, in the language of business, was a bad debt, best written off and forgotten.

He did not consider Jessie as an alternative ; women, for the time being at least, would have no place in his life.

* * *

He was early at the store. Bob had not arrived, and did not appear for nearly another hour. Dick was curt with him.

"When do you figure to get to work? There's goin' to be a change around here from now on. Get this place cleaned up right and do it quick, or hunt another job."

Quivering with terror, the wretched Bob became very busy.

Dick had about decided to sell out and leave town. He felt an overwhelming urge to blot out his useless past, wipe the slate clean and start afresh somewhere else. But first of all he must put the business on its feet. He would not leave Gateway under a cloud of debt and bearing away a dishonoured name. He had been a fool, but he would be at least an honest fool.

CHAPTER IX

THE gods are jealous of the too prosperous. The bears raided the Winnipeg wheat market, and found it overbought and ripe for picking. Con's margins had been spread very thin, and he was too far away to furnish more margin in time. Almost the first he heard of it was a wire from his broker to say he had sold him out.

For forty-eight hours Con was little better than a madman. He had lost, on paper, over fifteen thousand dollars, and that was only one worry, for he had bought trackage for his new mill, and the option had to be taken up within thirty days. He had counted on taking his profits as soon as wheat reached a price he had set, arguing that wheat must sell at that price before the new crop. It was a very good argument, but the wheat market has never learnt logic.

Negotiations for the sale of the old mill and some adjacent property had not yet been completed. He had only a few hundreds in the bank and immediate need of at least two thousand. The bank manager, knowing that he was dabbling in the wheat market, would lend him nothing.

There comes a moment when the most self-sufficient and secretive must unburden their minds. The thought of confiding in anyone would in general send a cold shudder through Con, but he felt that if he did not share his troubles with someone now, he would go out of his mind.

Molly was the last person in the world to carry a sad tale to, so there was no one he dare tell but Golden. He knew she was watching him; her curiosity flamed in her eyes, her chisel-shaped nose twitched with eagerness to learn what made him sit scowling and chewing his thumb.

They were alone one evening, Pearly having escaped from her brother's savage snarls, and Golden's health having shown signs of improvement of late. Con flung down the copy of the Winnipeg paper he had been frowning over, and looked up to meet his sister's piercing gaze.

He grinned sardonically. "Snoopin' again. Don't you know curiosity killed the cat."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I'm busted, that's all: the damn market went flooey and I got squeezed. Got to have a couple of thousand right away. Know where I can get it?"

"I don't, unless you dig up those teapots down cellar and try and sell 'em."

"Shut up, you fool," he snarled. "Damn little sense you've got. Forget all about that stuff, an' keep your head shut."

"Well, what are you figurin' on then?"

They gazed at each other without speaking; some things are better not said aloud. He dropped his eyes and nodded.

"Are you sure it's the only way?" she asked anxiously. "It's awful risky, you'll get caught at it one of these times."

"There you go again—talkin' as if I made a business of it. I wouldn't do it if I didn't have to. Is it my fault if the market went on the bum? I don't like it, but what

else is there to do? If you got anything else to suggest, go to it, I'm more than willin' to listen."

"Well, couldn't you raise some money on the mill or the house? Think anybody'd buy those vacant lots?"

"Well, I been lookin' into that myself?" he confessed with a slightly guilty air.

"I might have known it," she said ominously. "Did you lose all that money too?"

"No, no, I just looked into it. I have an offer on the mill, but the outfit can't find the money right away. There was no use tellin' you until the deal was ready to go through. I couldn't sell the vacant lots except the two on Maple Avenue, and I was holdin' off for a better price on those. We'd only get five hundred apiece for 'em now, an' have to wait for our money. We might put a plaster on the house, but that'd take time an' we've got to have the money right away."

"You didn't miss much," she commented. "A person'd need to be pretty easy to trust you any further'n he could throw a cow. What else have you been tryin' to put over?"

"Nothing, not a thing. You don't need to be so cursed suspicious."

She sat in silence for some minutes, twitching her sharp nose and plucking at her dress with thin fingers of a waxy transparency.

"Who do you figure to rob this time?" she asked at last in a low voice.

"For God's sake, shut up, you cacklin' old hen. Do you want everybody in Gateway to know?"

"You're makin' more noise than I am," she retorted. "Well, go ahead, go ahead, but take care, it's awful risky."

"I'll take care," he said confidently. "I'm not a fool."

* * *

Dick, struggling bravely to put his moribund business back on its feet, had an unfortunate public quarrel with Isenberg.

The occasion was presented by Jimmy Dow, who had contrived to get heavily into Dick's debt. Dick refused him any more credit and pressed for payment. He was surprised and enraged by the sight of Dow calmly walking out of Isenberg's with an armful of groceries.

"Hello, hello," he hailed him. "I'd have thought you'd settle up with me before you commenced buyin' from somebody else. If you got money enough to buy from another store, you've money enough to pay some of your debts."

Dow laughed uneasily. "I got no money an' a feller's got to run his face some place when he's broke. Your man wouldn't let me have a speck of groceries last time I was in your store."

He hastened to deposit his purchases in his wagon, climbed to his seat, and drove hastily away. Dick hurried in to talk with Isenberg.

"I wouldn't give that feller Dow much rope if I was you," he warned Izzy. "He's into me for ninety dollars, and I can't get a cent out of him."

"I don't give him no credit," answered Isenberg, "it's cash or trade mit dot deadbeat. He bring in some botter an' some seneca root just now an' trade, I don't give him no credit."

In his desperate circumstances, Dick could hardly be otherwise than irritable and suspicious. The sight of Dow had made him angry, and he was in the mood to quarrel with anyone.

" Oh, that's the way of it, is it ? " he said in a loud voice. " You steal my customers, eh ? get hold of 'em behind my back an' help 'em gyp me, is that it ? "

" My frien'," said Izzy with dignity, " you should not use talk like dot mit me. I don't shteat anybody's customers. I keep shtore, you keep shtore. I cannot get customers in my shtore oder dey wants to come. Customers do not leave your shtore oder dey wants to go. I am here to do business an' a man comes in here to do business, vy should I chase him ? "

" You cut prices," accused Dick.

" I do not sell at a loss, anyt'ing," asserted Isenberg. " I make a close price—I haf competition—but I do not sell at a loss. I am not in business for mine healt', an' never, never, do I sell at a loss."

" You're underselling me right now."

" My frien' you are young man, I am not young an' I haf been in business very much longer as you. I gif you vun leetle piece of ver' goot advice : you shtay in your shtore an' mind your business an' you vill haf a business to mind. If you do not vatch your business mit' bot' eyes, somevun vill take it away from you."

" That's what you're tryin' to do," was Dick's perverse reply.

" My frien', my frien' . . ." began Izzy placably.

But Dick was in no mood to listen. " I'm not your friend, damn you," he roared, turning sharply on his heel and marching out through a store full of staring customers.

His anger had cooled almost before he entered his own door. It was succeeded by a feeling of shame ; Izzy was in the right, and he had behaved unpardonably.

" If that bum Dow comes in here again, run him out of

the store," he commanded Bob White sternly. "I'm goin' down to sue the shyster right now."

But for all his ironbound determination to conduct his business henceforth on sound lines and give no more credit to wastrels, there remained a single weak spot in his armour.

When Newt Hokum came sidling through the door during Bob's lunch hour on the following day, Dick groaned inwardly. He knew that he should arise and hurl the mendicant forth, but somehow he could not do it.

A little raggeder and more bepatched, if anything; a little leaner and more frail looking; a little more unkempt and unshaven; Newt might have been taken for the arch type of all beggary and destitution.

He wore his confident and hearty air like motley on a corpse. "Why, hello, Mr. Black, you're lookin' fine. Business lookin' up, eh? That's the stuff. Well, some goes up an' some goes down, an' I'm always glad to see a smart man prosperous."

"I'm not any more prosperous than you'd notice," answered Dick with a faint smile.

"No? That's too bad, too bad," Newt shook his head and sighed deeply. "I tell you, Mr. Black, it's been a hard winter with my folks—many the day we been settin' chewin' on a crust an' lookin' starvation in the eye. That's hard when the weather's cold. But things is lookin' up for us a little these days, an' if I could get a few groceries just to kind of carry us along, why, I believe we'd pull around an' get straightened right out by fall."

"But how do you figure I can keep in business if I never get paid?" countered Dick sadly. "I don't like to be

hard on you, but there's plenty of other men come in here trying to run their faces. I can't let 'em do it unless I get money somewhere, can I? "

Newt was seized with one of his fits of trembling. He held his hand over his eyes. "I'm right up against it, Mr. Black," he said in a muffled voice. "You're the only hope I got left. Anything'll do. anything at all—old stuff what you can't sell."

"I have a sack of rolled oats the mice got into," offered Dick.

"Mice, what the devil do I care for mice?" said Newt with shining eyes. "A little thing like that . . . Any flour that's a little mouldy—sugar sacks that got damp an' has a little sugar stickin' to 'em—anything like that at all."

Dick permitted him to carry out to his wagon various odds and ends of spoiled goods that his own neglect and Bob's drunken carelessness had permitted to accumulate.

"I won't charge you anything," he said. "Call it a donation, but . . ." and he shook a finger under Newt's nose. "Mind this now, don't you come into this store again without something to trade or I'll stand you on your ear."

Newt wriggled all over. "I'll never forget this, Mr. Black, never as long as I live. But there's one thing: will you charge one little thing up to my account? Only ten cents? "

"Damn you," grumbled Dick between laughter and fury. "I know what you want. Here, take it, and get to hell out of here."

He tossed a plug of chewing tobacco over the counter.

Newt snatched it in mid-air, and fled out of the store with a thin whinny of laughter.

* * *

As he grappled with his problems, the first feeling of hopelessness wore off. Business was not so bad in the town: new immigrants were arriving daily and moving across the river to take up virgin land, and most of them had brought some money with them.

The day of the old style trader certainly was passing. Indians were growing scarce in Gateway and a knowledge of the Cree tongue was no longer a requisite for a store-keeper. The leisurely old system of bartering tea, tobacco, flour, gunpowder and blankets for peltry, was definitely at an end.

Dick had been reared in that tradition to a large extent, but he was young enough and had enough native shrewdness and energy to discard it. He realised that he would have to learn new ways, the ways, in particular, of Izzy Isenberg, and he set himself to learn them.

He made progress, but the business was terribly burdened with debt, and the load would have to be lightened. He had decided early that Bluebird would have to go—she cost far too much to keep. But the demand for fast driving horses had fallen off severely since the advent of the automobile in Gateway, and for long he could not hear of a purchaser. At last Jerry, the doleful hostler at the livery barn, heard of one.

"I think old Tom Hancock might take her," he said. "He wants a new drivin' horse, his black geldin' sprained his off hock last week, an' old Tom was askin' me only yesterday what I thought you'd take for the little mare. I

told him I didn't know, but likely you'd sell if you got a good price."

"I'll drive round an' see him Monday," said Dick, it being then Saturday afternoon.

He went back to the store. He had not sent out any statements for three months, and he was determined to bill all his customers now that he had his books up-to-date. The sum total of his book debts was quite respectable, were not so much of it due from men unlikely to pay five cents on the dollar. He foresaw a cloud of law-suits.

Gateway stores remained open on Saturday nights until ten. A few customers drifted in from time to time and were served by Bob in a state of excruciating sobriety, while Dick busily made out statements in his office.

Closing time came.

"All right, shut up the store and go home," said Dick. "I have a good deal of work to do yet."

Bob put out the lights and went home.

It was nearing midnight when Dick put the last of his statements in its envelope with a satisfied sigh, and got down off his stool to stretch the stiffness out of his back.

He opened the cash drawer and transferred the few bills and a couple of cheques to the safe, leaving a little small change in the drawer for Bob to start business with on Monday morning, and a note to say he would be out of town probably until afternoon.

Then he made a bundle of his statements to take up to the post office, switched out the light and let himself out of the front door.

It was very dark, with scattered drops of rain being blown across the river by a chilly north wind. Water

Street was deserted, for Gateway folk did not keep late hours.

He was about to turn in the direction of the post office when a man passed under the street lamp on the corner, coming in his direction. He recognised Pop Slingsby by his peculiar paddling gait.

His first instinct was flight. Pop was almost certainly drunk or he would not be out at such an hour, and when Pop was drunk he was insufferably garrulous. Dick was in no humour for idle conversation at the moment, and he turned back past Isenberg's store and down the narrow alley between it and a blacksmith's shop. Here he stood still until Pop should go by.

In a moment he was surprised and annoyed to hear heavy breathing at his heels, and Pop rushed in after him.

"Maw's after me," he panted, "she's ararin' around town swearin' she'll have my lights out on a skewer. I just seen her acomin' down street. O Moses, here she is now."

A vast blackness approached, a sepulchral voice lowed, "Cornelius, where was you?"

Pop was gripped and shaken like a rat. The terrible clutch haled him away. "I fix you plenty this trip," was the grim threat Dick heard.

His sense of humour struggled through his weariness and the darkness that had overlain his spirit of late, and he laughed aloud. It was to be a long time before he again saw any humour in that chance midnight meeting.

* * *

Pop's piteous wails for mercy had died away in the distance; Dick had had his brief laugh out and was on his

way to the post office ; and all Gateway seemed wrapped in the profoundest slumber.

Conquest Gates emerged stealthily from a decaying log building at the rear of Dick's store. He was in a hurry and in an evil temper, for he had been kept in his hiding place an hour by the light in Dick's office. Northern nights are short in May and it would be broad daylight by three in the morning. He wanted his task finished before then.

He attacked Isenberg's back door with his short crowbar, and forced it open without much difficulty. He slipped in and drew the door carefully to behind him, and switched on his flashlight.

It took him only a moment to locate the safe, standing in a corner at the rear, screened from the front of the store by two racks of ready-made clothes. It was a large safe and to his eyes looked forbiddingly massive, and Izzy was not the man to leave it carelessly unlocked.

But lying beside it were two small pressed bales of fur of about sixty pounds weight each. He viewed them with great satisfaction. They were portable, valuable, easy to dispose of and, hard to trace: the next thing to ready money. With these bales in his possession he would be well paid for his trouble even were he unable to open the safe.

Lest he be disturbed in the latter operation, he judged it best to remove them to a safe place, and accordingly carried them out to Dick's old log barn and hid them in some sacks behind a decrepit democrat.

Then he attacked the combination knob on the safe with hammer and cold chisel, having already taken the precaution to muffle the head of his hammer in several folds of strong canvas. It was a long job, longer even than he had

anticipated, and there were blisters on his hands and a crick in his neck by the time he had the knob punched out and the door open.

He wiped the sweat out of his eyes and stooped to peer within. There was an ordinary enamelled tin cashbox on a shelf, several ledgers and invoice files and a couple of locked drawers. He hastily pried the drawers open, but they contained only papers that did not appear to him of negotiable value.

He was just about to pick up the cashbox and make a hasty exit, when the store door opened with a loud creak behind him. He dived between the suit racks and crouched down with the hammer clenched tight in his fist. He regretted bitterly that he had not masked himself.

He heard a shuffling step and the sound of heavy breathing. An indistinct mass halted within four feet of him and began groping along the wall for the electric light switch.

The light flashed on and revealed Izzy Isenberg.

It was no premonition of evil that had sent Izzy to visit his store at past two in the morning, but merely an attack of acute indigestion.

Awaking at midnight upon news of a serious disturbance in the interior, he reached out his hand for a box of digestive tablets that usually lay on a table at his bedside, for he was subject to such troubles. He recollected with sorrow that he had left the box on his desk in the store.

He was reluctant to leave his warm bed and lay enduring his pains and wishing that his wife was not so much given to visiting her relations in Winnipeg, for cooking was not one of his accomplishments and when he was left alone he invariably made himself ill.

But discomfort within began to outweigh any possible discomfort without, and he rose at last with a groan and pulled on his trousers. He slipped his shoes on his bare feet, donned an overcoat, and paddled out into the dreary half-light of early dawn.

He let himself into his store and waddled up the aisle toward his desk, rubbing his globular abdominal extension and muttering woefully to himself in Yiddish. It was pitch dark in there, but at last his fumbling fingers found the switch.

The first sight that met his dazzled eyes was the yawning door of his violated safe. He stared at it, then he opened his mouth to yell for help.

The yell died stillborn in his throat, for a stunning blow descended upon the top of his bald skull.

* * *

Con dropped his hammer and bent over the prostrate man. Isenberg still breathed. Con snatched up the cash-box and fled, leaving behind him his hammer and cold chisel. His nerves were so badly shaken that he forgot even the fur bales in Dick's old barn.

Holding the cashbox in front of him under his coat, he ran across a vacant lot and came upon a battered wagon beside which a lean red ox lay placidly chewing his cud, and a long-eared spindle-shanked little mule made ineffective snatches at a tuft of grass just out of reach.

He dodged round the wagon, ran down an alley, and plunged into a thicket of willows newly in leaf. There he halted to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his face.

He had good cover now almost all the way to his own back door, and he ran stooping among the bushes and crossed two streets like a scared rabbit. He had purposely

left the kitchen door unfastened, and slipped in noiselessly.

There, a red dressing gown wrapped tightly about her emaciated body and her face perfectly ghastly in the wan light, stood Golden.

He recoiled with a gasp. "What the hell?" he said in a hoarse whisper. "What the devil do you mean by givin' me a scare like that? Get back to bed, damn you."

"Con, did you make it, did you make it?"

"Uh-huh." Then with a savage grin. "Probably croaked old Izzy Isenberg too."

"Oh, my God, no. How?"

"Well, it wasn't my fault, the damned old fool comes chargin' into the store. He'd no license there that time of night, nobody asked him to come. If he'd stayed home he'd have been all right, but he came right in on top of me. I didn't have time to get away."

"Con, what did you do?"

"Well, if you have to know, I let him have it over the head with my hammer."

"Did you—did you kill him?"

"How do I know? I didn't mess around there after, but he was breathin' when I left him. But if he is, he is. It was his own fault, why couldn't he stay home? Prancin' around two o'clock in the mornin'. Nobody asked him to."

"O my God, Con. O my God."

"Aw, shut up an' go to bed, the thing's done now. Nobody asked you in on this either, you don't need to have anything to do with it. Why the devil can't you mind your own business?"

He turned and marched down the cellar stairs. She followed him in silence, and though he gave her a hostile glare he made no effort to send her away.

The cashbox was soon pried open, and proved to contain over six hundred dollars in bills and silver, besides a bundle of cheques. It was more than he had expected, and was due to the fact that Izzy had been too busy on the Saturday to go to the bank, so that the box contained three days' takings.

Con grunted with satisfaction and transferred the money to his own pockets.

He was turning the bundle of cheques over in his hands, uncertain what to do with them, when Golden suddenly reached out and took them. "Give me those," she said.

"What do you want of 'em?" he inquired suspiciously. "You daren't try an' cash 'em."

"I can take better care of 'em than you can. If anything comes up they won't think of searchin' me."

"Well, maybe you're right, but you'd better burn 'em. You want to be dern careful with 'em anyway."

He tossed the broken cashbox carelessly into a corner and stood up. "Likely you'll get us both in the coop, but if you will have 'em . . . Best burn 'em though."

"I'll take care of them," she insisted stubbornly.

"Obstinate as a mule. All right then. Now get to bed unless you want to wake Pearly. Don't want her in on this too, do you?"

"My God, no."

* * *

News of the crime began to circulate in Gateway shortly after nine o'clock that morning. At that hour Isenberg recovered sufficiently to drag himself to his front door and call for help.

The dramatic story passed through the town like a flame, and within an hour the greatest crowd in the town's

history had congregated in front of the store, making excited and foolish comments and doing its best to push past the Mounted Policeman on guard.

A vigorous search was being made for suspicious characters, and all the roads out of town were being watched. Philadelphia, in particular was being combed relentlessly, for a rumour had gone round that a halfbreed had been seen carrying a heavy burden down to the river at dawn, and putting off in a boat.

The rumour was eventually run to earth by the discovery that the breed had stolen a sack of potatoes and fled with it to his shack by boat, but it caused a lot of excitement for the time being.

Golden insisted on going to church that morning, though of late, her malady had again taken a turn for the worse and she seldom left the house. But she awoke from a troubled doze in a state of such nervous tension that she could not stay indoors. She must learn if the crime had been discovered and who was suspected.

Leaning on Pearly's arm, therefore, she set off. The first person they encountered, stammered in his excitement and anxiety to be the first to tell them the news. The groups converging on the churches could talk of nothing else, and the minister made a passing reference to the crime in the course of his sermon.

Golden's self-control was superb. She betrayed no more than a casual interest in the lurid details pressed upon her, and in church she was almost the only member of the congregation who made any pretence of being devout.

After service it was worse; rumour had had time to grow, and a number knew for a fact that Isenberg was dead. The grisly word murder was on everybody's lips.

Golden reached home ashen-faced and hardly able to walk, but the progress of her mortal disease was by now so far advanced that no one noticed that she looked any worse than usual.

She was surprised to discover Con not much perturbed. He had been at pains to get at the truth of the wild rumours in circulation. Izzy was not dead or even dying, and there was every prospect of his being up and about in a week. All attention also was now being concentrated on the mysterious halfbreed seen crossing the river at dawn. The frightened man had taken to the bush, and was being hunted through the jackpines by a large *posse* of men.

They discussed the matter until Pearly said firmly that she did not want to hear anything more, it made her sick. She hoped fervently, however, that the cowardly robber would be caught and put in jail.

Con gave her a sardonic grin. "Don't wish him any hard luck do you? Do you know who he is?"

"No, and I don't want to. I don't want to hear anything more about it. It isn't doing Golden any good to be talking about it either."

"You're right," said Golden. "I'll go up and lie down, I think, I don't feel very good."

CHAPTER X

GOLDEN lay down on her bed, but not to rest. The problem that haunted all her waking hours continued to trouble her. Everything gave place to her burning passion for Dick.

The crimes committed by her brother caused her far less concern than his successful courtship of Molly. Once Molly had been the great enemy, and Golden had hated her most implacably. Now she almost wished that Dick was still worshipping at her shrine.

While he was devoted to her, at least he was not finally lost to Golden, for it had been apparent for some time that he was little likely to be successful in his wooing.

But now he was at large, unprotected by prior attachment, a ready prey for any designing girl who desired him. Rumour had naturally been busy with his name since his break with Molly. The gossips were mostly of opinion that Jessie Jenifree's long and skilfully conducted hunt would soon be crowned with success.

This was what made Golden writhe in spirit. All her hatred and jealousy was transferred with redoubled force from Molly to Jessie. Jessie was not the girl to play fast and loose with her captive ; once Dick was within her reach she was not likely to lose much time in marrying him.

Golden did not know that in Mrs. Black she had an unconscious ally. That good lady had made up her mind

that Jessie would make Dick a good wife, and a large part of her eternal monologue lately had consisted of a recapitulation of Jessie's virtues. Dick, not unnaturally, had developed a strong distaste for the unfortunate girl.

But in Golden's sick mind he was in hourly danger of being snapped up, and she lived in sick dread of hearing any day that he was to be married.

She felt herself helpless to prevent it until chance put the bundle of stolen cheques in her possession. She had taken them from Con in the first place with some vague idea of holding them as a weapon against him in case he went too far.

Now an even more sinister use for them occurred to her. She had not much conscience, but the thing she contemplated had somehow to be justified.

She told herself that it was Dick she loved. Let him come to her destitute, dishonoured, disgraced, and she would still love him and welcome him before any other man on earth. No other woman could love him as she did, or would be prepared to make the sacrifices or bear the hardships she would willingly and gladly under go for his sake.

She painted her rival to herself in the blackest colours. Jessie was a hard, cold, selfish, designing girl, only saved from being a second Molly by her lack of beauty. It would be justifiable to save Dick from her clutches at any cost.

So she fortified her resolution, brooding and tossing in a fever all through the day and the long, long night which followed. On Monday morning, by sheer exercise of her indomitable will, and looking like a corpse risen from the tomb, she rose and dressed, put the bundle of cheques in her handbag, and set out to accomplish her dark purpose.

Bob White had come down to work feeling very feverish and consumed by a raging thirst. Dick had been so continuously in the store of late, and had kept so vigilant an eye on him, that he had had no opportunity for speculation.

His small salary had been quite insufficient to pay his board and at the same time to quench his thirst for liquor. His last penny had been spent some days before, and he had been hanging on in a state of enforced and painful sobriety until his next cheque was due.

When he opened the cash drawer and learnt from Dick's note that he would not be in the store until afternoon, he immediately helped himself to fifty cents in change and made a quick trip to the Imperial bar. He returned feeling very much better.

Young Mose, an excellent man of business, was doing remarkably well for a Monday morning next door. There were many people curious to behold the scene of the assault and robbery who entered the store upon one pretext or another.

Mose had curtained off the corner where the rifled safe stood. People who wished to gaze upon it without buying anything speedily found themselves in the street with their curiosity unsatisfied, while those who made a purchase were privileged to peep behind the curtain at the wrecked safe and the grim dark stain of blood on the floor beside it.

Nobody came near Bob, and he was beginning to feel very thirsty again when Golden entered. She had evaded Pearly and slipped out of the front door while her sister was busy in the kitchen. She was barely able to walk and her face was terrifying to behold.

But she essayed a smile as she fell limply into a chair.

"How d'you do, Mr. White," she said with a ghastly affectation of gaiety. "Been havin' quite a little excitement around here lately, I hear."

Bob's sight had begun to fail him, in fact all his senses were growing very dull, and though he thought she looked ill, the seriousness of her condition escaped him.

He answered therefore, with his usual polite cheerfulness to customers, "Yes, Miss Gates, this is gettin' to be a terrible town to live in."

Golden had continued to buy her household necessities at the store as a link with Dick, almost the only one she had left, poor creature. It gave her an excuse for dropping in frequently and having a few words with him if he were there. He was always polite to her in a constrained unhappy way.

She had also been at some pains to cultivate Bob, thereby picking up little scraps of news about her beloved, and was on quite confidential terms with him.

They discussed for some minutes the one topic of interest in town that morning. Then he rose with a weak excuse about wishing to drop in next door and learn more details, helped himself to the silver that remained in the cash drawer, and went out.

She had hoped for something like that, for in the old easy days before Dick was paying much attention to business, she had often watched the store while Bob went out for a drink.

The door had hardly closed behind him when she was on her feet. From her bag she took the bundle of stolen cheques and, opening the cash drawer, she pushed them far back in it. Then she slipped out of the back door.

When Bob returned he had a vague idea that there ought

to be some one in the place, but as he had just put four more whiskeys into an empty stomach, for he had been unable to eat any breakfast, he was no longer very clear about anything.

He propped himself up in his usual corner behind the counter, eyes glassy and jaw hanging, until the desire for yet another drink became too strong to be resisted.

But there was no money left in the cash drawer. Rum-maging in it in the hope of finding somewhere a stray coin, he came upon the bundle of cheques.

It was not what Golden had contemplated when she put them there ; indeed, it is hard to say exactly what she had expected, but the result was what she had desired.

When ready money had run low, Dick had sometimes endorsed and passed over to Bob on his salary some cheque paid in by a customer. The remembrance of it running in Bob's fuddled brain, he abstracted a cheque from the bundle and hastened over to the Imperial.

" Will you cash this for me ? " he mumbled, pushing the cheque across the bar.

The bartender picked it up and stared at it. It was made out to I. Isenberg. He turned it over and found that it had not been endorsed. Then he looked hard at Bob, who stared owlshly back at him.

" I'll have to ask the boss about this," he said.

He hospitably placed the whiskey bottle before Bob, set out a glass, and hurried out to show the cheque to the proprietor.

He returned quickly and eagerly engaged Bob in conversation. " The boss is just sendin' over to the bank to see is the cheque good," he explained.

There were no other customers in the bar, and the bar-

tender left his usual post and kept between Bob and the door. Bob was in no mood to notice or care. He poured himself out a second drink with a shaking hand and gulped it down. Then a third.

He became dimly aware of a tall man in a khaki uniform and a conical hat, who was asking searching questions about the cheque.

"Got'm in cash drawer," said Bob boldly. "Perf'ly goo' cheque."

"Come and show me," invited the constable urgently.

Bob had a sense of being wafted out of the bar and down the street and into the empty store, and then the tall man was shamelessly rifling the cash drawer.

"Here," protested Bob weakly. "You can't do that, y'know. Sa-ay!"

"Sit down," said the policeman sternly. "Do you know how this bundle of cheques came to be in here?"

"Found'm in there," answered Bob. "Jus' found'm."

"Where's your boss?"

"Don' know," mumbled Bob, and slid down in his chair with eyes closed and head hanging. The policeman shook him once or twice without eliciting anything but a drowsy murmur, and then began a systematic search of the premises.

* * *

Dick drove Bluebird out to old Tom Hancock's place some miles in the country. Hancock was an old-timer, a large and prosperous landowner, and a lover of good horseflesh.

He was a tall, erect, white-headed old man, a veteran of the American Civil War, though of Canadian birth. He

wore a heavy silvery moustache and a neatly-trimmed imperial after the fashion of those stirring days.

He was pompous and long-winded and not to be hurried.

"Yes, sir, that's a good little mare you have there," he said. "I might think of buyin' her. You have her pedigree there, eh? Yes, yes, will you let me look at it?"

Dick had wisely brought the document with him, and the old man pored over it for a long time, breaking off to tell long and pointless tales of horses he had known. He also inveighed bitterly and at great length against automobiles.

"If you're sellin' this here nice little horse to buy one of them consarned contraptions," he said sternly, "I won't buy her, no sir, I won't touch her."

Dick assured him that he had not the remotest intention of buying an automobile.

"Well, let's have some dinner," said Hancock hospitably, "an' we'll dicker about her after."

The meal was plentiful and leisurely, and then at last Hancock made his final pronouncement.

"I don't like dickerin'," he said. "I make a man a fair offer an' he can take it or leave it. I'll give you six hundred dollars for the outfit as it stands, horse, buggy an' harness."

It was a fair though not a liberal offer.

Dick hesitated a moment, regret at parting with Bluebird his chief motive. He sighed.

"I'll take it, Mr. Hancock," he said.

With the cheque in his pocket, and divided between grief at losing his pet and pleasure at having ready money to defray his most pressing debts, he started back to town on foot. He got a lift on the way and arrived in Gateway

just in time to deposit the cheque to his account before the bank closed.

Then he walked to the store. A constable of the Mounted Police stood aside to let him enter and laid a hand lightly on his shoulder.

"I have a warrant for your arrest on the charge of assaulting and robbing Israel Isenberg," he said. "I warn you that anything you say now may be used in evidence against you."

Later in the day, Golden heard the news and fell in a faint.

* * *

Mr. Macklin Jarvis, crown prosecutor for the judicial district of Gateway, sat in his private office. In the outer office a red-headed girl with an upward cast in one eye pounded an aged typewriter in the intervals of crochet work.

To him entered Mrs. Black with her queer toppling walk. She nodded to him, sat down, pulled out her handkerchief and proceeded to wipe her eyes and sniff.

The broad smooth face of the lawyer registered resignation. "Sorry, Mrs. Black," he said, "but I have to inform you again that your late husband tied up his estate in such a manner that I can do nothing for you. I can only pay you your annuity monthly."

Mrs. Black finished wiping her watery eyes, sniffed loudly, and sat up straight.

"Yes, Mr. Jarvis, I know you told me that before—you ain't ever told me nothin' else. But bein' as this is a extry special case, I thought you could do something. They gone an' got my poor boy up there in the jail for something he never done, an' it's up to me to find a lawyer

to get him out of there, an' if you won't give me the money, then I think the least you could do would be to be his lawyer an' you could take what was comin' to you out of my money an' I'd wiggle along some way until it was paid up."

The lawyer had never been able to convince her that he had no control over her estate beyond his duty of giving her fifty dollars on the first of each month. It was fixed in her mind that he could give her more if she could only persuade him. She felt that, with Dick in prison, she had at last a really strong case: he could scarcely be hard-hearted enough to refuse her in her extremity. But he was shaking his head at her in the old annoying way.

"I know it's hard, Mrs. Black," he explained patiently, "But I really can do nothing. Your late husband's will is most explicit that under no circumstances can any portion of the estate be hypothecated."

He thought the word hypothecated would hold her, for a long legal word or two had proven effective in the past.

But she had lost her awe of legal phraseology. "I don't care whether it is hypof-what-you-call-it," she said hardily, "I need some extry money right now. It's very tough if I can't get ahold of my own money once in a while. My diseased husband never let me do what I wanted when he was alive, an' it ain't fair he should stop me when he's gone. I bet he didn't know my poor boy'd get in jail or he wouldn't never have done such a thing. He was self-willed an' maybe a bit tight, but there wasn't a mean spot in him, an' he'd be the first to say give me the money an' let me get my Dick out of that mis'ble old jail. If he knew about it, that's what he'd say, an' you know it right well, Mr. Jarvis."

The lawyer sighed deeply. "Mrs. Black, honestly, I can't let you have more than your monthly allowance."

"Well, then, Mr. Jarvis, if you will be so mean, the least thing you can do is to fight this case for Dick."

"I assure you that nothing would give me greater pleasure, Mrs. Black, but, most unfortunately, my duties as crown prosecutor prevent me. I shall have to appear for the crown, painful as it will be for me."

"Now ain't that just too bad?" she burst out indignantly. "You won't do a thing for me, not only that but you got to get up there an' persecute my poor orphan boy. What'd he ever do to you, I'd like to know? He never hurt nobody in his life—he wouldn't harm a fly. He's the best boy ever was if it wasn't him bein' so self-willed about goin' without his rubbers in the wet an' not wrappin' up warm, an' him with a weak chest. But for you to get down an' persecute him . . ."

"But Mrs. Black, I'm not persecuting him."

"You are so, Mr. Jarvis, you are so. Ain't you just now this very minute told me you was crown persecutor?"

"Crown PROSECUTOR, Mrs. Black, prosecutor."

"Mff. What's the difference? Ain't a particle as I can see. Don't tell me, you're goin' to try an' get my poor boy in behind the bars for something he never done, an' him an orphan at that."

"My dear Mrs. Black, I certainly don't intend to do anything of the kind, but it is my duty to see that justice is done and the law enforced. He will have the benefit of an absolutely fair trial and of every reasonable doubt."

"Well then, he won't go to jail, because he never done it, an' you can persecute him all you want if you will be so mean."

She was mopping her eyes furiously as she spoke, but whether she was shedding real tears could not be told.

The crown prosecutor was a man of strictly legal mind. He dealt justly with Mrs. Black, but there being no statute made and provided covering the present situation, he lacked the tact to know what to do. He was kind-hearted by nature, but he had a very strict sense of duty and of his own importance.

She saved him the necessity of doing anything by rising and saying with pathetic dignity, "Well, I'm real sorry you won't help me, Mr. Jarvis, I didn't think it of you. I guess I'll have to try an' get another lawyer. Good day."

He sprang up to open the door for her, but she passed him with a frigid little nod and opened the door herself.

In the corridor without she came to a door on which was newly painted in large black letters, "Henri Lagarde, Barrister, Notaire," and underneath, the invitation, "Walk In."

One lawyer being about as good as another to her just then she walked in. She discovered a very short young man, wearing heavy glasses, and with black spiky hair sticking up all over a round massive skull, laboriously pecking at a typewriter with one finger.

The young French-Canadian had only opened his office in Gateway a week before and his practice had not yet risen to the dignity of a stenographer. In fact, he had as yet no practice.

At sight of a possible client he sprang up eagerly and came forward with a courtly bow. He produced a chair, saw the lady comfortably seated, sat down before her with another bow, and asked her in careful English with a

slight French accent what he could have the pleasure of doing for her.

"Well, that's nice of you, real nice," she said happily, most favourably impressed by his exquisite courtesies. "You see, mister, they got my poor boy—an' him a orphan—in the jail for something he never done, an' Mr. Jarvis he will persecute him—just come from him this minute—an' he wouldn't give me any money, not a cent, on account of my poor diseased husband's will bein' that I can't only have fifty dollars the first of each month, but my diseased husband never knew when he made that will that Mr. Jarvis would be persecutin' him an' my poor boy'd be up in the jail . . ."

Lagarde's brain began to reel, he blinked his eyes rapidly and listened with a smile of strained attention. It was no use to attempt to stop Mrs. Black until she ran out of breath, and her lungs were good. He heard her speak at length of her orphan boy, presumably an infant; of her diseased husband, disease not specified; of the mysterious persecution and apparent chicanery with money of the crown prosecutor; and no light came to him.

Mrs. Black's rapid utterance, impeded at times by the handkerchief which she incessantly employed, and her use of north-western idioms with which his college-learned English had not familiarized him, all combined to increase his confusion.

At last she gulped, gasped, and was silent.

He hastened to anticipate further speech. "And your name, madame, it is?"

"My name? Oh, I'm Mrs. Black. I been around this here town for years an' years—thought everybody knew me. My poor pa he was one of the first white men in

Gateway—come up from Manitoba in a bull wagon across the prairie—buffaloes an' wild Indians afightin' all round . . ."

"And your son, Mrs. Black, is accused of what?"

"Why, they do say he beat up Mr. Isenberg an' robbed him, but he never done it. Didn't I tell you? An' that's what I went in an' see Mr. Jarvis an' asked him would he give me some of my money or fight Dick's case an' take what was comin' to him out of the estate . . ."

Lagarde now began to see daylight, though the reason for Mr. Jarvis' persecution of the lady still remained a profound mystery to him.

He beamed, he rose and bowed. "I shall be most happy, Mrs. Black, to undertake your case," he assured her truthfully. "Do not, I beg of you," he went on, "concern yourself with payment. That will adjust itself later, I assure you, madame, I shall not be exigent."

She did not understand what exigent meant, but she gathered that here at least was some one anxious to serve her without being too insistent on his pound of flesh. She was considerably comforted, and upon renewed and repeated assurances that he would commence work upon the case forthwith, she went away.

Lagarde paused to adjust his necktie, which was perpetually under his left ear, and made a vain effort to smooth down his unruly hair. Then he composed his features into an expression of great gravity and determination, caught up his hat, and set off at a brisk trot for the jail to interview his first client.

* * *

Dick sat in his narrow cell in the jail upon the hill and reviewed his past life. There was nothing else for him to do at the moment.

He found the fact that he was innocent no consolation whatever. He was not upheld by a consciousness of rectitude ; he merely smarted under a sense of injustice mixed with apprehension.

. The knowledge that he was now probably a ruined man, even if acquitted, was an aggravation of his afflictions. He had begun to put his affairs in order and had made an excellent beginning. Left alone, he felt that he would have re-established himself : now his creditors would descend upon him like a pack of wolves ; his debtors would repudiate their debts ; and he would emerge from his unjust confinement absolutely destitute and disgraced.

He began to realize how the gods confound the just and unjust for their sport.

His mother was his first visitor. She was more incoherent than ever, and habit was so strong in him that he could not keep his mind from wandering while she talked.

Yet he felt contrite at sight of her. He felt that it was because of his own criminal negligence that she was left to fight his battles single-handed. He had lived at her expense ; the money he received from his own business being mostly frittered away in his pursuit of the rapacious Molly ; and now she was straining her slender resources and pinching herself to defend him at his trial.

She did not reproach him—such a thought would not have entered her head—nor would she permit him to reproach himself. It not only interrupted the current of her own unending flow of talk, but caused her genuine distress, as he soon perceived and so desisted.

A warder came to warn her that her time was up. " They'd no business to put you in here," she said indignantly. " The idea of them doin' a thing like that—some

people is awful foolish. I'd like to get my hands on that there long-nosed mountie, I'd tell him a few things. Them mounties think they're the whole works—goin' around in a red jacket, so important, huh—they better get some sense under them fool hats of theirs."

"You'll have to leave now, Mrs. Black," the warder reminded her again.

"Yes, yes, you told me that before, young feller. I'm agoin'. Don't get down hearted, sonny, I'm agoin' right down to see Mr. Jarvis, an' he'll soon have you out. Now, young feller . . ."

Her voice died away down the corridor.

At the big outer door she detained the warder. "Just a minute, young feller, I want to tell you something. You take good care of my boy in there. Don't you be givin' him none of that awful grub I hear you feed the other prisoners, because he ain't rightly a prisoner at all, it's all just a mistake, an' he's got a weak stummick, an' if he eats that truck it'll likely make him sick an' I'll come on you fellers for it, see if I don't . . ."

The warder cunningly manoeuvred her out upon the doorstep, and now closed the door in her face.

Lagarde now appeared. Dick did not know him and was not impressed by his appearance, looked sulky and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd like to know why they arrested me?" he said. "I wish you'd find out what the devil they think they have against me. Somebody must be weak in the head."

"We will soon learn that, I will make them produce their evidence," said the Frenchman confidently.

The preliminary hearing was held promptly, and Dick heard with stupefaction of the finding of the stolen cheques

in his cash drawer, and other matters to be detailed presently. Reserving his defence by Lagarde's advice, he was duly committed for trial at the fall assizes.

Owing to the gravity of the offence with which he was charged, bail was refused. Isenberg's condition had taken a turn for the worse and he was reported seriously ill. If he died, the charge against Dick would be changed to one of murder.

He was taken back to prison in a mingled state of bewilderment, indignation and alarm.

Lagarde declared his confidence unshaken. "I shall acquit you, my friend," he said. "The case against you is based on evidence circumstantial alone. There will be big holes, veritable cavities, in the prosecution. I shall destroy it all."

He destroyed it with a vigorous downward gesture. "That is nothing, you shall go free. But, and here is the hard part, observe, I desire that you shall leave the dock without a stain on your character. That is what I now set myself to do. I shall indicate, perhaps I shall find it possible actually to have the real culprit arrested. Make yourself easy, my friend, be calm, be cheerful, I, Henri Lagarde, am with you, and that which I say that I will do."

He drew himself up to his full five feet one and one-quarter inches and expanded his chest. Then, noticing the smile with which Dick was regarding him, he burst into merry laughter.

"I am funny, eh? I am not dignified. I have sometimes thought that with a beard, hey? and with a big belly, I shall be more dignified. But those will come. Meantime, I keep myself thin running after your affairs. I go to run now."

Dick was cheered in spite of himself. He began to feel a warm regard for the optimistic and energetic little Frenchman. He decided to entrust him with the winding up of his business. It was now only the beginning of June and his trial would not come on until September. The position of the store in the hands of the wholly incompetent Bob was hopeless. He instructed Lagarde to close the store and make the best possible arrangements with his creditors, placing all his assets in his hands for distribution. He was determined to discharge all his obligations, if possible, in full.

This action of his had a bad effect. In commercial circles to be a rogue is reprehensible, but to be a bankrupt is criminal. The merchants of Gateway felt that he was no longer one of themselves, that he had disgraced their order, and they shook their heads over him.

Dick had plenty of friends, so-called, but friends have short memories for the afflicted, and all of us instinctively give jails a wide berth—we do not care to have such institutions on our visiting list.

So, for a long time, he saw only Lagarde and his mother. He knew now that Molly would not come near him. Perhaps he judged Molly more harshly than she deserved—her worst faults were greed and indolence—she was not vindictive or deeply designing. But he had tried and condemned her in his mind, and all that remained there of her was detestation and a wonder how he could have been fool enough to let her so exploit him.

But for a long time he had some vague hopes of a visit from Jessie Jenifree.

* * *

He misjudged Jessie also. She loved him sincerely, and that she did not love him more was his own fault.

She was not beautiful or endowed with much charm, but her rigid standard of propriety had never been questioned.

To visit a suspected criminal in his prison cell would throw at least the shadow of a shade upon her immaculate reputation. Reputations are very fragile things in a small town. She sincerely wished Dick well, but she could not compromise herself by visiting him while he was under a cloud.

And there speedily arose another reason. Her acquaintance with Mr. Eliphalet Turner, the new accountant of the local branch of the Empire Bank, ripened quite vigorously.

Mr. Turner was a bony young man. He had eyes with drooping lids, large front teeth, hair neatly parted in the centre, and a highly mobile Adam's apple in a very long neck.

At that time in the West, banking was an aristocratic profession, and to his exalted social position Mr. Turner added a beautiful piety, attending church twice every Sunday. Jessie was also a devout churchgoer, and they came to see much of each other.

They began to take walks in company. Mr. Turner hung his head over her at the end of its long neck like a rather curious flower, and allowed the mild and moony light of his big teeth to play upon her.

A soft hope grew up in Jessie's gentle bosom. She thought less often of Dick. She occasionally sighed for his high spirits and ready laughter, and contrasted it with the somewhat melancholy and utterly humourless temperament of the banker. But Dick's lightness of heart had not saved him from ruin and possibly crime, while Mr. Turner was saintly, dependable, and so very, very safe.

She loved safety, she adored respectability, she worshipped conventionality. She turned her eyes trustfully upon Mr. Turner.

But he was a cautious young man, with a lofty idea of what the wife of a banker should be. He regarded previous entanglements with suspicion, and the four-cornered Dick-Con-Molly-Jessie affair had naturally come to his ears. People had predicted in his hearing that Jessie would eventually capture Dick. This thought pained him extremely.

In the course of a decorous Sunday afternoon stroll, he led the conversation to the subject of the Isenberg robbery.

"I don't like to talk about it," said Jessie nervously.

"You don't think that man Black did it?" he challenged.

She gave him an upward glance out of the corner of her eye. His large front teeth were framed in a strained grin, and there were hard little puckers about his eyes. He looked as savage and primitive as so saintly a young man could look.

She divined that he was jealous and it pleased her: no one had ever been jealous of her before. Her reply was, therefore, diplomatic.

"Poor boy," she said with a sigh. "You know we went to school together and so he's a very old friend. He used to be so nice, I hate to think he'd do such a thing."

"But if they convict him?" he persisted.

She sighed again. "I'm afraid I could never be friends with him after that," she murmured. "I wouldn't want to see him again, ever, after doing such a terrible thing."

"I don't think there'll be any doubt about his being convicted," said Turner with the ferocity of a buck rabbit.

"You know, Miss Jenifree, I don't like to think of your being intimate with such a man—even if he is acquitted. A thing like that leaves a stain on a man's character he can never recover from. It wouldn't be the proper thing to know him in my—your position."

Submissively she murmured acquiescence, and waited hopefully. But he said no more at the time.

Two weeks later, however, he announced that he had been unexpectedly promoted to the managership of a new branch in a small country town.

"I'm so glad," murmured Jessie with downcast eyes and a faint colour in her cheeks.

"So am I, Miss Jenifree, because . . . Well, you see, it'll be very lonely out there, small place and all that, and I'll be very lonely. Of course, it's promotion and a rise in salary, but I'll be very lonely. So, well, I was thinking if, well—perhaps—if you cared . . . ?"

Jessie moved a little closer to him and breathed a soft, "Yes, Mr. Turner?"

The trail they were walking on wound erratically through poplar woods. There was no one in sight. He took a deep breath, and in a blundering sort of way put his arm round her, being a sober-minded and very inexperienced young man. In a blundering and inexperienced way he bent his long neck and kissed her all down one side of her half-averted face. She was inexperienced herself, for no young man had ever shown any wild anxiety to kiss her before.

She was willing enough, pleased and happy and proud, but she felt a little inward twinge. Mr. Turner at his best was only second best—if only Dick had put his arm round her and kissed her!

But after they had exchanged another kiss or two, she fell quite naturally into the way of it, and the vision of Dick grew dim and faded almost away.

Her acute apprehension of the conventions was somewhat shocked by the almost indecent haste with which her marriage must be solemnized if she wished to accompany her husband to his new post. But he was so insistent, so anxious to remove her beyond the possible influence of Dick, and he was so very respectable, and his position was so absolutely assured : if she let him go away there was always the risk of another girl making her appearance . . . Most important of all, a plain girl who is determined to get a husband dare not let any good chance slip.

In short, she heroically braved social censure, and married him four days after his proposal. The ceremony was characterized however, by the very strictest decorum. Becomingly arrayed in dark grey, with a low pompadour, and a dark green velvet hat, Jessie departed from Gateway with her husband.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN Con remembered the two bales of fur he had hidden in Dick's old barn he was filled with rage. He had imperilled his neck for a paltry six hundred dollars and some unnegotiable cheques, and left behind something worth two or three thousand.

On the Sunday evening he said to Golden, "I'm goin' back after those pelts."

"For heaven's sake, Con, you'll get caught."

"I'm goin' after 'em," he repeated stubbornly. "May as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. What I got ain't enough, an' you can get into your bed an' stay there, see."

He left the house at eleven. Darkness had come, though a faint milky gleam lingered in the northern sky. The stars were feeble and the scattered street lamps cast an indeterminate light without shadows. Things were visible in vague outline at a considerable distance.

He snarled mutely at the clear sky, but there was no one abroad in the streets through which he slunk like a prowling wolf. All the houses were dark and silent, though a distant uproar indicated where some river hogs, newly in off the log drive, were celebrating in their customary manner.

He reached the old barn, pulled the crazy door ajar and groped along the wall until he reached the pile of sacks

behind the obsolete democrat. The bales were undisturbed.

He quickly hoisted one upon his shoulder, edged his way out, took a deep breath and made a dash for it. It is not easy to run with sixty pounds upon one's back, and he reached home bathed in sweat and breathing in laboured gasps.

He pushed the kitchen door open, and a shadowy figure sprang up from a chair. He dropped the bale with a thud.

"You damn fool," he panted in a choking whisper, "you nearly scared me to death. You do it every time, why in hell can't you stay in bed?"

"I couldn't, Con," she replied almost meekly. "Don't be mad at me. I was scared you'd get caught."

"An' what the devil good could you do if I was? Get back to your bed an' shut up, you'll have Pearly down here next to see what's goin' on. I'm goin' back for the other bale."

"O Con, *Don't*, it's too dangerous."

"Will you shut up?"

He went out again, but his nerve had been shaken and his knees felt weak. When he approached Dick's store he found that the lumberjack celebration was beforehand with him; loud, harsh voices were using lurid language, some one was singing "The Michigan Bull Puncher," a song not sung in drawing rooms, and another man was amusing himself by imitating a coyote.

There were forty or fifty river hogs congregated on First Street and on the vacant lot behind Dick's barn. They were likely to sing and fight and howl in the vicinity until daylight.

He cursed them and returned home.

"Did you get it?" inquired Golden, starting up again from her chair.

"I've a notion to wring your measly neck," he growled. "I told you to get in your bed."

"You didn't get it then. Did you lose your nerve?"

He took a step toward her, his clenched fist raised. "Another word out of you and I'll smash you one. It's none of your cursed business. How in hell could I get it when there's about a hundred blasted lumberjacks all pickled an' raisin' hell all around the place? I got one bale anyway. Go on now, get up to bed—and shut up."

The day after Dick's arrest he packed the furs in two suitcases and took the train to Winnipeg, where he registered under an assumed name at an obscure hotel. Posing as a small independent fur trader, he disposed of his unmarked pelts without difficulty for close to twelve hundred dollars, there being some very good fox and marten skins among them.

With rare self-control he forbore to visit his broker, and kept out of the wheat market during his stay in the town, nor did he indulge his taste for riotous living. He changed his name and his hotel after disposing of the furs, and flattered himself that he had successfully concealed all his tracks.

He returned to Gateway with a valuable present for Molly and enough money to meet his most pressing obligations and leave a little over.

Fortune was still with him. He completed the sale of the old mill, and raised a mortgage loan for the construction of the new mill at the tracks. He put the work in hand at once, so that he should be prepared to handle the new crop when it came on the market.

Convinced that he had at last enough experience to be able to forecast the wheat market and steer clear of pitfalls, he contemplated a big killing. To give himself more capital to operate on and assure himself larger profits, he mortgaged the house and sold all the vacant property he could find purchasers for.

Golden concurred, not without a battle, but she was too ill to stand out long against him. Pearly as a minor, had no say in the matter and displayed no interest.

He was now perched on a giddy pinnacle : on the one hand lay wealth, on the other ruin. Everything must go either well or ill, there was no middle course. It was a noble gamble, such as his soul delighted in.

The only cloud on his firmament was Molly. She was by no means satisfied. She missed Dick sincerely, not, of course, to the extent of going to see him, but she would have liked to dance with him, to go driving with him, to receive little presents from his hands, and to feel herself enfolded in his ardent but reverent love.

Con could not modify his dictatorial attitude for long. When most prosperous he was most insufferable. He was generous to her, but expected a humble and grateful acknowledgement of every present. He also forbade any intercourse whatever with other men. Molly had been in the habit of getting her admiration where she could find it : she found life extremely dull without a man at her side paying her attention. She had not the faintest intention of leading a cloistered life.

They quarrelled almost incessantly, and the bond that held them together was more often than not on the point of snapping. But Con was determined to marry her : not only his affections but his vanity was engaged. Only

the handsomest girl in town was worthy of his lordly attentions. She, for her part, saw no other suitable match. There were bachelors enough, but they were relatively poor, and the idea of resigning her prize to some other girl was insufferable.

So, from various motives, they managed to patch up a series of truces and rub uncomfortably along.

Con was too much preoccupied with his affairs during June to press the question of an early marriage, as he desired. Thenceforward, they had another bone of contention, he urging forward their wedding doggedly and she as stubbornly postponing it.

* * *

On the day of Dick's arrest Golden had her first serious haemorrhage. Her condition seemed critical, but she fought for her life as she fought for everything, fiercely, tenaciously, unremittingly. She would not acknowledge defeat.

She clung to her mad plan. Dick was to go to the penitentiary in order that he might be ruined and disgraced and removed forever from Jessie's influence, and when he came forth again, alone and broken, to face a hostile world, she was to be on hand to marry him and comfort him with her love. But in order to accomplish her purpose she must live.

She rallied, but the fates seemed malign. She learned that Isenberg's life hung in the balance: any day Dick might be called upon to face a charge of murder.

If Isenberg died, she would be faced with the alternatives of sending the innocent Dick to the gallows or of offering up her brother to the hangman's noose and yet

losing Dick because of the part she had played in getting him arrested.

Most terribly was she torn. Should she allow Dick to go to his fate and follow him into the unknown? Should she save him to lose him, and bring disgrace and ruin on herself and her brother? Could she bear to see him in the arms of another woman?

The agony of her spirit was such that she sank again.

In Pearly she had a devoted and indefatigable nurse. There was a strong measure of affection between the sisters, for Golden had consistently protected the younger girl in her childhood from the brutality of her father and the malicious teasing of her brother.

Pearly saw good qualities in Golden that were hidden from all the rest of the world. More accurately, Golden had turned toward her a side of her nature she never displayed to the world at large.

Pearly knew and approved of Golden's passion for Dick, and for some time she believed that the warm affection she herself felt for him was of a sisterly nature. Not even when he was arrested did she suspect that the pang which went through her heart was to be ascribed to any deeper feeling.

All the time she was nursing Golden through those first critical days she was aware of a longing to go and comfort Dick in his misfortune. She was burningly anxious that he should know she believed firmly in his innocence.

When Isenberg was reported out of danger Golden rallied. Her plan was in the way of succeeding; it remained only for her to get well. She became calm, telling herself that she must husband her strength in order that she might

be quite recovered when Dick's imprisonment came to an end.

Her improvement was so marked that Pearly was able to put into effect the resolution she had formed. Having seen Golden soundly asleep one afternoon, she hurried up the hill to the jail, and preferred a request to see Dick.

She was led into a room adjoining the warden's office, and presently he was brought in. He was amazed not only by her presence there, but by her beauty. In that drab and sinister den she looked like an angel, warm-skinned, deep-eyed and of proud carriage. In a year she had blossomed wonderfully.

She stood breathing stormily as if she had been running, and the clear pallor of her cheek was stained a deep damask red, but she met the wonder in his eyes fearlessly.

"I won't stay," she said hastily. "I just came to say that I know you didn't do it, and I think it's a shame they put you in here. I'm sure they'll find they're wrong and let you out."

He was more moved than by anything in his imprisonment. "Thank you, Pearly," was all he was able to say, the tears standing in his eyes.

"I can't leave Golden long, she's very sick," she explained.

She gave him her hand fleetingly, and turned to hurry away. But she halted an instant in the doorway to say, "Don't be down-hearted, Dick, it'll all come out right in the end."

Upon her return she found Golden awake and fretful.

"You left me all alone," she complained. "Where were you? You left me alone, nobody in the house. Anything might have happened."

"Well, you were sleeping nicely, Golden, and I thought I could run out for a little. I haven't been out of the house since you took sick."

"Where did you go?" with acute suspicion.

Pearly hesitated, some obscure feeling warned her against telling. But Golden's feverish eyes were fixed intently upon her.

"I went up to the jail," she answered quietly.

"Up to the jail? What for? That's no place for a decent girl. What did you want to go to the jail for?"

"I went up to see Dick Black and tell him I knew he was innocent."

Golden was thrown into violent agitation. "You did! What do you mean by it? He's not innocent—he did it—he'll have to go to jail."

A stormy light blazed up in Pearly's eyes. "He is so innocent," she asserted vehemently. "He is so, I know he is."

"He's not, he's not, he's not," repeated Golden in a frenzy. "He did it, and he'll have to go to jail for it. He has to go to jail." She beat with both hands on the coverlet.

Pearly forgot her anger and bent over her. "Golden, Golden, lie down. You'll have another haemorrhage. Lie down, please dear," She took the raving woman by the shoulders and pressed her gently back upon the pillows. "You'll have another bad attack, and you know how dangerous that is."

Golden had no strength to resist. She became limp, and her eyes overflowed with tears which rolled down her face upon the pillow. She wiped them away fiercely with the back of her hand.

" You love him too ? " she accused with hot jealousy.

" I don't," burst out Pearly passionately.

Then she recovered her self-control and her tenderness. She bent over the dying woman and spoke in a soothing voice.

" Now, Golden, honey girl, don't get such silly notions in your head, there's no sense in them. You must get well and strong, and then when they find out he didn't do it and let him go, he'll want to marry you. I like him and that's why I want him to marry you. And I like him just because you do."

* * *

When Mrs. Black next visited her son, she found him unaccountably concerned about the Gates family.

" I ain't seen much of none of 'em," she replied. " Ain't overly anxious to neither. That Con's around town blowin' the way he always done, all about the wonderful things he's agoin' to do—he's about as popular as the itch. Golden's sick abed, I hear, with the consumption, an' Pearly's nursin' her. That girl's goin' to die of the consumption, an' I don't think she'll be a awful loss ; she's got just about the meanest tongue in town, an' the things she said about your poor pa . . . "

" But is Pearly nursin' her all alone, ma, an' keepin' house too ? "

" Well, I guess she is, and why not ? somebody's got to nurse her, ain't they ? Pearly's young an' strong, an' Con ain't much home, I guess—mostly eats down town at the Gateway House, so they tell me—just goes home to sleep. So he won't make much work around the house. Other times he's mostly down around the new mill he's

buildin' or out with that there McLay girl. You don't seem awful interested in Molly no more, son."

"No." Dick shut his mouth hard on the word.

"Oh well, she don't amount to much an' that's a fact. She cost you a heap of money, an' she'll cost anybody what has anything to do with her aplenty too. She's set this here town by the ears ever since she was big enough to get some school kid to feed her ice cream for a kiss. Men ain't got much sense if you ask me: any woman'd see through her in a minute. They tell me her an' Con jangles all the time—bet they jangle a heap more after they hook up . . ."

"Will you do something for me, ma?" interrupted Dick.

"Why, sure, son, what is it?"

"Go in an' see Pearly an' give her any help she needs."

"Is Pearly the new one? You don't no sooner get through with one than you get another. Even bein' in here don't seem to make no difference. How'd you commence to be goin' after Pearly? This is the first I heard of it."

"I'm not goin' after any girl, ma, I have a lot more important things than girls on my mind, but Pearly took the trouble to come up here and tell me she knew I was innocent; I haven't noticed the rest of my friends crowdin' in here to do that."

"She did? Well, that's pretty nice of her," admitted his mother handsomely. "That Pearly is a good girl—a whole lot the best of the Gates outfit. Maybe she'd like me to do a little for her—it is pretty tough havin' a sick woman an' the whole of that big house on her hands. I ain't got much to do just now neither, Mrs. Overby's

little girl's up an' around again—she had the scarlet fever an' her eyes is still pretty sore—it gets 'em that way an' in the ears. You never had it, but it's a bad thing, I remember little Martin Fowler—you went to school with him—or was it Peter Rames . . .”

“Time, Mrs. Black,” warned the guard.

“All right, young feller, I'm acomin'. All right, sonny boy, I'll go in an' see does Pearly want anything done.”

* * *

Henri Lagarde had spoken with the confidence natural to one of his sanguine nature, but as time went on he grew more serious and even somewhat depressed. He had espoused Dick's cause with an enthusiasm more than professional, and had set himself the double task of freeing the innocent and detecting the guilty.

This proved much more difficult than he had anticipated. True, the evidence was purely circumstantial, but he could unearth no evidence in rebuttal.

All Dick had to say of his movements on the night of the crime was that he had worked late on his books and then taken a short stroll through the deserted streets in order to clear his head before going to bed.

He had encountered no one who could support that assertion, while the Slingsbys were prepared to swear that they had found him lurking in the lane beside Isenberg's store after midnight.

How the stolen cheques came to be in his cash drawer was an insoluble puzzle, and the discovery of the second bale of fur in the barn behind his store made the case look no brighter for him.

Lagarde pictured himself as failing ignominiously at the trial, the crown witnesses proving impregnable to

attack, his client sentenced to a long term in the penitentiary, and his own career blasted before it had well begun. Those were his black moments and at such times he would pray devoutly to the Blessed Virgin for aid.

In the rebound, he saw himself with merciless cross-examination and brilliant oratory confounding all hostile witnesses and reducing the jury to tears. His client would be triumphantly acquitted and his own reputation firmly established. At such times he was a little inclined to snap his fingers at divine assistance.

The police, satisfied that they had the right man, had dropped the case after an abortive attempt to connect Dick with the Holm burglary.

That left Lagarde free to pursue some private investigations, and he circulated busily through Gateway in search of some one who knew more about the business than he had yet told.

Naturally, one of the very best places to hear indiscreet and revealing conversations was in the bar-rooms. Where the talk was noisiest and the whiskey flowed most freely he was quite often to be found, a glass of liquor in his hand and his sharp ears pricked. The liquor went into the spittoon, but what reached his ears was picked over and examined by his keen and active brain.

He was in the Palace bar one evening rather depressed and wondering if he was not wasting his time in being there at all. There were not many present, a dozen or so river hogs in from the rafting grounds on a short spree, and a handful of more or less sober citizens, including Colonel Robert Lee Long.

The Colonel had slightly exceeded his customary allowance of liquor and was running his perennial bluff in a more

hectoring strain than was altogether safe with men of the temper of lumberjacks.

Pony Peters took exception to some remark of his. Pony was a tall and lithe young man of panther-like grace and agility. He had discarded the working clothes of a river pig, and was attired in a neat suit of blue serge with the trousers turned up half way to the knee, displaying a pair of lavender silk socks and pointed-toed patent leather shoes.

The only marks of his calling were a round, soft, black felt hat cocked over one eye, and the white handkerchief about his neck, tied at the back with the flap hanging down in front. No true lumberjack will ever descend so low as to wear a tie, a stiff collar or a stiff hat.

Pony hunched his shoulders and pirouetted stiffly on one toe.

"Mr. Stranger," he said softly, bobbing his head and wrinkling his nose, "Mr. Big-Big Man, you're lettin' off some hot air around here too plenty. An' what, if I might be so good as to ask, is your name?"

"My name, sir," was the haughty answer, "is Colonel Robert Lee Long, of Virginia, sir."

"Some name," said Pony with a deep bow and a wave of the hand. "Some skookum name. Lee Long, eh? But you don't look like no Chink. There was a Chink laundry dump down to Dog's Leg of that same name. I left a suit of pink underwear with 'em to wash, an' I couldn't never get the pants back. I done my best—I went through 'em, I went through 'em good an' plenty—the air was full of Chinks an' laundry. But I never got them underpants—pink pants they was—maybe you seen 'em.

"Maybe you was the pro-priator of that there Chink laundry; the name was the same anyways. It's a good old Chink family name—I never seen it onto no white man before—not even a near white."

The lumberjacks listened with happy grins and gurgles, for Pony was an accredited wit.

But the Colonel had taken the drink that oversteps discretion, and took the joke in bad part.

"What the devil do you mean, sir?" he blustered. "I am a white man, sir, from the best old Kentucky families. I have a mighty good notion to clean up on you."

Pony began to jump up and down, both feet together.

"Leave me be," he wailed. "Hold me back somebody. Don't let me get away, I'm scared. Here's a near-white old Southern Kentucky Virginia Chink agoin' to clean up on me."

The Colonel took a wrathful step forward and lifted a ponderous fist.

Pony leaped back six feet at a bound, and stood visibly trembling, his knees knocking together, his face twisted into an expression of most abject terror.

The Colonel continued to advance.

"Lemme run," shrieked Pony, "I can run like a horse. An' don't you dast come anear me, Mr. Lee Long Kentucky Chink, I can kick like a horse, too."

Still the Colonel came on.

Pony sprang into the air, clapped his heels together twice, came down lightly on his toes, swung back his right leg, and kicked the Colonel with terrific force and precision under the chin.

The Colonel went down as if shot.

Pony struck an attitude, one hand on his hip, and an innocent and childlike smile on his boyish face.

"Some kick?" he crowed. "See the little pony kick?"

Then he whipped round, neighed shrilly, and pranced and curvetted out into the street. Whooping like Indians and laughing uproariously, his friends trooped out after him.

The humane Lagarde went to the assistance of the prostrate Colonel, but it needed the help of two more men to lift his ponderous body into a chair, and a stiff glass of whiskey to bring him to.

He clung tightly to Lagarde, who was anxious to be gone.

"I am obliged to you, sir," he said with difficulty, nursing his jaw with the hand that was not clutching the Frenchman's coat lappel. "Please don't leave me just yet, my nerves are shaken, sir, but I shall be all right in a moment. It was an unprovoked and cowardly attack, sir, totally unexpected. I'm not as young as I was, sir, or I should have dealt with him, but just now I'm a little shaken. Please don't leave me."

There was something pathetic in the quivering, whiskey-sodden bulk beside him and Lagarde was touched. He sat down beside the Colonel and listened patiently to his babble.

"This here country ain't run right, sir. Down in my own home State if a man was to use me so, I would have shot him on sight, sir, like a dog. A gentleman ain't permitted to tote a gun up here, and in consequence he is made the victim of low white trash. Down South, sir, I should go out right now and shoot him down on the street."

The Colonel's fuddled mind wandered to another pet grievance of his.

" Yes sir, and there's another man in this here town I ought by rights to shoot on sight. You probably know him. He's a mean low down hound, sir, a crook, sir, unfit for a gentleman to associate with, sir, under any circumstances. His name, sir, is Con Gates, and I have good reason to believe he has been concerned in dishonourable actions "

" Of what nature, may I ask ? " inquired Lagarde with feeble curiosity.

" That, sir, I am not at liberty to reveal. It concerns the honour of my late friend, Sir William Quigley Bart. He imparted it to me under the seal of strictest confidence. I have reason to believe, sir—this in your ear."

He bent forward confidentially and breathed whiskey into Lagarde's face.

" In strictest confidence, sir, I believe him to have been concerned in the Holm burglary."

Lagarde nodded wearily. He was bored, the charge was preposterous. He escaped as soon as he could from the Colonel, who was recovering his nerve, and tentatively broaching the subject of a small temporary loan.

" I have wasted my time," reflected the Frenchman bitterly, trudging dispiritedly back to his office. " That man is a fool and a liar, why should a rich man like Gates burgle a small store ? "

CHAPTER XII

RELATIONS between Con and Molly worked up to another crisis. Her stubborn refusal to fix the day of their wedding infuriated him, and he came rapidly to the point when he began to doubt whether even she was worthy of him. He told himself grimly that if she put him off much longer, she could whistle for him for he would go away and not come back.

It might increase his prestige in town if he brought in a bride from outside, say, from Winnipeg, some fashionable girl with high urban connections. He dallied with the idea and even went so far as to drop a hint to that effect before Molly.

It had its intended effect, and alarmed her seriously. She was now twenty-two and had wit enough to see that her prospects of a successful match would soon decline. Most of the girls of her own age in Gateway were already married, and those who had come forward to take their places already hinted with cruel little smiles that she was destined to be an old maid.

The hateful term was dropped in her very presence by impudent little Rhoda Hallick, a fluffy-haired, blue-eyed, little pocket edition of Molly, but with more vivacity.

She was only eighteen and the deadliest rival for her throne that Molly had yet encountered.

Molly was panic-stricken. She had been trained to no occupation and was firmly determined never to work for a living, and her father resolutely refused to provide her with money in order to seek the wider matrimonial opportunities that Winnipeg offered.

So she was in a chastened mood when Con delivered his ultimatum. "Well, Moll, when's it to be? You can't keep me on the string forever, you know; I want to get married an' settle down. Come on now, name the day."

"Give me another month, Con, it'll take me that long to get ready."

"Another month, that'll take us into September," he grumbled. "Well, all right, I'll hold you to that. Go ahead an' get ready—no more foolin'."

"No, I'll be ready then."

"That's the girl, now you're talkin'. I'll give you something nice for that. Say what you'd like and I'll send to the 'Peg for it."

She was always ready for presents, and smiled with pleasure. His promise of a silver-mounted dressing table set almost reconciled her to her approaching marriage.

Her father had never yet shown the least interest in her matrimonial prospects. When he was in town between trading trips he accepted the presence of Con and Dick at the house with a cold indifference. He had made it abundantly clear that he liked a quiet life, and they seldom came indoors when he was there.

He was at home now and Molly prepared to tell him the news. This was no easy task, for she determined that her wedding should set a standard for Gateway, and that her

trousseau should fill the heart of every girl in town with sick envy.

That would cost money, and Alexander was a thrifty man. But she was the only person in the house who did not go in terror of him, and she attacked with vigour and directness.

"Father, I'm goin' to get married."

"Aye?"

"Yes, at the beginning of September, to Con Gates."

"Aye?"

"I'll want some new clothes."

Alexander favoured her with a long hard stare. "What's wrong wi' those ye have?"

"I've nothing fit to get married in, a girl must have a trousseau."

Alexander drew out his handkerchief and blew a trumpet blast on his big nose. This was a warning that he was being annoyed and would presently become extremely unpleasant, and was always so interpreted by his family.

But Molly had entered his presence prepared for battle, and she disregarded the signal. "I want some money," she said.

"Havers, girl, havers."

With this terrible word he had been accustomed to rout his family. It was a final judgment from which no appeal was possible. The fact that Molly continued to stand her ground showed what iron courage and determination she possessed. Even her adamant father was astonished and a little daunted by her boldness.

"Father, I want some money for my wedding. You're not a poor man."

Alexander had thrown his bomb and it had proved a

dud. He felt defenceless.

"I'm no a rich one," he said weakly.

You're rich enough to give your daughter a little money for clothes when she's gettin' married. I've nothing fit to put on, and I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself for being so tight."

"Well, I'll gie ye nothing," snapped Alexander.

Molly left it at that for the present. She could not cope with him in a pitched battle, but she had other weapons. She pervaded the house for several days with a martyred air, speaking to her father only when she had to, and then in monosyllables and with averted face.

Alexander had more affection for his beautiful daughter than he had ever cared to acknowledge, even to himself. He was deeply hurt, and showed it by making life a purgatory for Mrs. McLay and Margaret.

"An' when are ye bein' marrit?" he asked Molly abruptly one day.

"I don't know," she answered listlessly. "I can't get married in my old rags, and you won't give me any."

"Who said I wouldn't?"

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away.

"Here, haud on, how much do ye want?"

"How do I know? If I'm to have a decent outfit it'll cost a lot of money, and you make such a babyish fuss any time anybody asks you for a nickel that I'd rather not."

"That's no way to speak to yer father," said Alexander angrily.

"I don't want to speak to you," she retorted with cold scorn, "I don't want to speak to anybody who's so cheap and mean he'll let his daughter go and get married in dirty

old rags, a man who don't care if she looks like some breed wench out of the ditch."

He had never been bearded in his own den before by any of his family, and the attack fairly took his breath away. He blew his nose loudly and glared at Molly, but without the least effect.

"Ye're excited," he said finally. "Ye know well I'll gie ye anything wi'in reason."

She relented, and came and put her arms round his neck and kissed him and shed a few tears, and he stroked her bowed head and felt paternal and lover-like at the same time.

She did not fail to exploit her success. In all his parsimonious life Alexander had never spent so much money in so short a time. There were occasions when he was almost in a frenzy, when he roared and stamped, or hung his head and all but wept at the prospect of approaching ruin.

She proceeded relentlessly with her plan, using tears or caresses or a whiplash tongue as occasion required. Her trousseau elicited gasps and gurgles and glances of bitter envy from the girls who were invited to view it.

But when she propounded her program for the wedding itself Alexander verged on apoplexy. She pointed out that the house was far too small to accommodate the guests she intended to invite. He had not known there were to be any guests, and vehemently repudiated the idea.

The battle raged for three days, but there was a chilled steel quality to Molly when she was roused that appalled even her grim father. He gave in and permitted her to announce that a wedding lunch would be served in the

parlour of the Gateway House after the ceremony to the sixty selected guests invited.

Broken in spirit, foreseeing a penniless old age, and all but resigned to that fate, Alexander hardly offered resistance to the final arrangements, which included hothouse flowers sent all the way from Winnipeg by express.

For once Con and Molly found themselves in complete accord. The projected magnificence seemed to him thoroughly in keeping with his estimate of himself. He entered into her schemes with such enthusiasm that Alexander found himself hating his prospective son-in-law more profoundly than he had ever hated anyone in his morose and unfriendly life.

And so the eve of the wedding day arrived in a final feverish bustle of preparation. After the luncheon the couple were to depart on the afternoon train for Winnipeg on a ten-day honeymoon.

It was also the eve of Dick's trial, for the assizes had opened and the two cases before his on the calendar had been disposed of.

* * *

It found Henri Lagarde a prey to the deepest despondency. His investigations had proven fruitless; he had uncovered no witness to support Dick's blanket denial of the charge against him. Lagarde thought of his aged mother in far away Quebec, whose eleventh, youngest, and favourite child he was, and he wept. She had predicted such great things of him and now he was a failure. He prayed very devoutly to the Blessed Virgin that night.

But morning brought a return of fiery Gallic courage. He would attack; woe to the witnesses this day, he would

tear their testimony to shreds and scatter it to the four winds ; he would smite the crown prosecutor hip and thigh and hold his tattered argument up to the derision of the world ; he would move the jury to the depths of its being with his eloquence ; his sword was unsheathed in his hand and he had thrown away the scabbard.

It was one of those peerless days in early September, when the short northern summer, hastening to its close, is clad in a pensive beauty that fills the heart of man with a sadness deep but sweet. One thinks of a young hero marching out with a smile to meet a certain but glorious death.

The courtroom was well filled, for the case had aroused a great deal of interest. It would have been packed but for the counter attraction of Molly's wedding.

Everybody in Gateway knew Dick, and most people liked him, yet there were few who did not believe that he had broken Izzy Isenberg's head, cracked his safe, and stolen his furs.

The jury were in the box ; Dick, pale but collected, in the dock ; the judge, an ascetic looking man with a veiled but penetrating glance, on the bench. Below him were the crown prosecutor, suave and polished, not inclined to press the case too hard but determined to do his duty, and Henri Lagarde, at the opening of his career, very excited and nervous, his spiky hair in wild disorder, his black gown awry, giving short explosive coughs and fidgeting with his neckband.

The scarlet, blue and gold of the Royal North-West Mounted Police gave a touch of colour to the drab assemblage.

Dick's eyes roved over the courtroom. Every face

almost was familiar but many familiar faces were absent. He was glad that Molly was not there or Jessie Jenifree.

A place had been found for his mother close to him. She wiped her eyes and sniffed incessantly, but actually she was far from being unhappy. She had the most perfect faith in her son's innocence and ultimate acquittal, and this day in court was a break in the monotony of existence.

At the same time she felt keen resentment against Mr. Macklin Jarvis, whom she persisted in denominating the crown persecutor, and against Izzy Isenberg. A pimply-faced juryman also inspired her with distrust. He was a jobbing carpenter with whom she had once had a dispute touching some repairs to a porch. She felt that he would bear watching.

The first important witness called was Isenberg. He was fully recovered, but had grown thin, and his clothes hung loosely on him. He gave his evidence collectedly. He had not identified his assailant.

"I come in my shtore, I see my safe busted open, I get a shlug on der head. I did not see who do it, it come from behind, and I do not know any more until it is long time after."

He could not be certain at what hour he had visited the store on the night of the crime, but he knew that it was after midnight.

He identified certain cheques presented to him for inspection as having been in his safe on the night in question.

Jarvis strove to find out what his previous relations with Dick had been, but Isenberg would display no rancour.

"Ve haf some business dealings, and vun leetle dishpute ofer a bad customer of his. Odervise ve vas always on good terms."

Lagarde, speaking in a high strained voice, made him repeat that he had never seen his assailant or known of his presence until struck down from behind, and let him go.

It was now Pop Slingsby's turn. He was evidently divided between self-satisfaction at being the centre of attention and apprehension of Maw, who sat near the door in her crimson dress and yellow turban and fixed upon him an implacable eye.

He deposed that on the night of May 26th, about midnight, returning to his home, he had met accused in the lane next to the Isenberg store, that the accused had seemed anxious to avoid him, and that he had left him there and come away.

Lagarde was upon him like a tiger. What was he doing in a dark lane that was not on his way home at midnight? Was he sober at the time? Were his intemperate habits not notorious? Was he not extremely short-sighted? How, in view of the fact that he was hopelessly intoxicated at the time, that he was short-sighted at any time, that the night was dark and the lane darker, could he possibly identify anyone?

Pop's head waggled helplessly on his shoulders. He stammered and mopped his bald forehead with a red cotton handkerchief.

From the body of the court came a cowlike low "Cornelius."

"Silence" snapped the judge and glared at Maw.

But the interruption had given Pop time to recover himself. Though mercilessly badgered, forced to admit that he was habitually intemperate and short-sighted, and that at the time in question he was in flight from his wife, he stuck to it that it was Dick he had seen and no other.

He was followed by Bob White, a dismal object, dirty and ragged, and evidently far gone in alcoholism. Since being given his freedom, under police surveillance, he had eked out a wretched existence with odd jobs. He had managed, in order to brace himself for the coming ordeal, to cadge three drinks of whiskey. As he had eaten nothing much for a week, the liquor had taken instant effect.

He was roughly handled. The judge ordered him testily to speak up, and the crown prosecutor was stern with him, for he had to be called and such a witness was a double-edged tool, dangerous to either side.

Lagarde reduced him to maudlin tears. He confessed that he was in the habit of helping himself to small sums of cash in Dick's absence : that he was a confirmed drunkard, unable to get work because of his character ; and that, in short, he was utterly untrustworthy and unreliable in every respect.

But his evidence that he had found the bundle of stolen cheques in the cash drawer still stood.

There followed a detective sergeant of police who had conducted the search of Dick's premises. He had taken the cheques from the cash drawer and later discovered a bale of fur in the old building behind the store. He also produced the hammer with which Isenberg had been struck down and the cold chisel used on the safe.

The hammer was passed round among the jury, and the crown prosecutor pointed out that the letters R. B. had been rudely scratched on the handle with a hot iron. The letters, in the opinion of the detective sergeant, stood for Richard Black.

He was in error. The hammer had really belonged to one, Roderick Bell, a blacksmith, who had been doing some

repairs at the Gates mill the day before his sudden death. He had forgotten his hammer there the evening before, and received a fatal kick from a wild broncho he was shoeing on the following morning. Con had found the hammer, lying rusty and forgotten, in a corner, and converted it to his own uses. But it now formed a link in the chain of circumstantial evidence that was being wound round the unfortunate Dick.

Lagarde drew from the witness the admission that he had no other clue to the identity of the criminal. It was true that the robber might have used Dick's old barn as a cache, for the building had never been locked and anyone could enter. It was possible that Bob White, in collusion with the robber, had hidden the cheques in Dick's cash drawer. It was by no means certain that the letters burnt into the hammer handle indicated that its owner was Richard Black.

It was a brave effort, but Lagarde felt despondently that it had made little impression on the jury.

There followed brief testimony that Dick's affairs were in a bad condition at the time, and that he had quarrelled with Isenberg publicly. Lagarde could only protest vainly against the admission of this evidence.

It was approaching noon. The court adjourned until two o'clock.

At that moment, radiantly beautiful in veil and orange blossoms, Molly was being married to Con, and presently the guests were to assemble in the parlour of the Gateway House, where great preparations had been made for their entertainment.

* * *

Dick gazed about him in a state of bewilderment. The

piled up testimony almost convinced him that he had actually committed the crime in some somnambulistic state.

Mrs. Black boiled with indignation against Mr. Jarvis, who appeared to her a very Torquemada.

Lagarde twisted his head from side to side, adjusted his gown with trembling fingers, and smoothed down his hair which sprang up again like so many wires.

"Courage, my friend," he besought Dick. "There is no evidence, they have proved nothing. The trial is not over."

But in his heart was only despair.

The spectators were in general of the opinion that the masterly handling of the witnesses by his counsel would not save Dick from the penitentiary. The jury were led out, looking very serious and important, and enjoying the inquisitive glances of the crowd.

The courtroom was crowded to suffocation when court reconvened. It was believed that Dick would be the only witness called for the defence and that, after the speeches of opposing counsel and the judge's charge, the jury would not be long in reaching a verdict. They hoped to be present at the final dramatic moment before court adjourned for the day.

At the Gateway House the wedding luncheon was getting under way with a jollity that even the brooding melancholy of Alexander McLay, mentally computing the cost, could hardly dampen.

Lagarde arose, his affected calmness belied by his jumping eyes, much magnified by his thick glasses. He spoke in a vibrant voice, rolling his r's.

"My lord, for the witness I shall now proceed to call, I must ask the protection of the court. He is apprehensive,

and I have encountered the greatest difficulty in bringing him into court at all, but his testimony is vital to the interests of my innocent and wrongfully accused client."

The crowd craned and gaped. Here at last was something unexpected, and the case had threatened to end so tamely. The judge granted protection, subject to the usual reservations.

"Call Newton Hokum," said Lagarde.

Newt shuffled into the witness box. He bowed to the judge with humility and an ingratiating smile. He drew himself up and looked sternly at the jury, but the effort was too much for him and he broke down and coughed weakly behind his hand.

"What is your name?" began Lagarde.

Newt stared. "Why ain't you just now called me?" he said. "But I ain't ashamed of it," blinking his eyes and bowing again to the judge. "It's Newton Hokum, most gen'ally called Newt for short.

"And what is your occupation?"

"Well, I got a farm out Crystal Lake way, eighteen mile out, yes sir."

"And where were you, Mr. Hokum, on the night of May 26th?"

"Right here in town, sir."

"Where were you between the hours of two and three o'clock on the morning of the 27th?"

"I was alayin' under my wagon on the vacant lot back of the Jew store, sir. You see, times bein' hard an' me not so well fixed, I didn't put up at no feed stable for the night, but just tied my team to the wagon an' rolled up in my blankets underneath. That's the way I most gen'ally always does when I stop over a night in town."

" Exactly, Mr. Hokum, and what was the occurrence that took place at that time? "

" Well sir, mister judge, your honour," turning and speaking in a confidential and appealing tone to the bench.

" Speak to the jury, speak to the jury," snapped the judge.

Newt bobbed nervously in the box. " Yes sir, just what you say, sir."

To the jury, with a sudden raising of his voice. " There was me, gentlemen, alayin' under my wagon. Well, you know, it was a kind of a chilly night, an' I guess the cold woke me up, or I don't know, maybe it wasn't. But anyways, gentlemen, I did wake up. It was gettin' kind of light by that time, not really daylight, but kind of half an' half—so you could see a little ways—you know the way it is just then—kind of half dark but not so dark but what you can see things clost to pretty plain . . ."

" Keep to the point, ah, Hokum," interrupted the judge.

Newt jumped and wriggled his lean shoulder. " Yes sir, yes sir, I'll do just what you say, mister judge, your honour."

To the jury in a confidential tone, " Well, as I was asayin', it was kind of half light."

The judge sighed and leaned back in his chair with drooping lids. Newt, warming to his tale, leant over the front of the witness box and gesticulated at the jury, delighted beyond measure at having so attentive an audience.

" Suddenly, as I was alayin' there, shiverin' some," he gave a realistic shudder, " I hears some kind of a noise, an' here was the back door of the Jew store open an' a man comin' out. I was away off to one side by the implement

agency, an' I couldn't see him very good right away, but he come right towards me arunnin', an' he had some big thing under his coat that he was holdin' with both hands, this way."

He pulled his ragged jacket out in front of him.

"Well, gentlemen, I just lay still awonderin' what it was all about, an' he run right by me—as clost as what I am to you fellers—right by me, an' I got a real good look at him as he come by."

He seemed on the point of saying more, but checked himself with a start and became limp.

Lagarde's voice, persuasive but firm, broke the hush that had fallen upon the courtroom.

"And what did you do then, Mr. Hokum?"

Newt licked lips that seemed suddenly to have gone dry. He glanced at the scarlet-coated policeman out of the corner of his eye, and was seized with a violent fit of trembling, like a wet dog shivering in a cold wind. He turned a frightened face to the judge.

"Well sir, mister judge, your honour," he quavered, "that's something I'd liefer not mention if you don't mind. I don't want to get into no trouble, I wasn't never a man to hunt trouble, though God knows, your honour, I never had to."

"I'm afraid you must tell the jury," said the judge, not unkindly. "You're under the protection of the court, you know, and any admission you make may not be used in evidence against you"

"Thank you, your honour," said Newt with a particularly low bow. "I'll trust your honour any time."

He addressed the jury again in a tone at once confidential, exculpatory and pleading.

" Well, gentlemen, when that there feller run off out of sight, I lays there awhile not knowin' just what to do. But there was the back door of the Jew store astandin' wide open an' nobody around, see? An' me with no supper into me an' mighty small chanct of breakfast as I could see, an' my woman to home on the farm with nothin' but a few spuds what was beginnin' to sprout an' go wrinkled an' bitter to feed to the kids, but inside that there Jew store was all kinds of good grub, just to be had for the takin' as you might say."

He paused, drew a long, sobbing breath, and plunged on, " There was this here other feller had busted the door open an' run off—it wasn't me done it, gentlemen, I swear to God it wasn't—an' it 'peared to me that if anything was took, why, it'd be blamed on him."

He stopped speaking and stared hopelessly about him, beads of sweat standing out on his grimy forehead. The court was absolutely still. He gave a great gulp and resumed.

" Well, gentlemen, I went in—just to get some grub—nothin' else. I ain't never did such a thing in my life before, an' I never will again, but that time I fell down, gentlemen. I went in that store an' grabbed the first things I could get my hands onto—I was too scared to stay long in there. An' all I took, gentlemen, honest to God, wish I may die this minute, all I took was a little sack of rolled oats, an' a big hunk of cheese, an' a can of tomaters, an'—an' a plug of chewin'."

There was a ripple of laughter through the court, swiftly suppressed.

" And that was why you did not give information to the police, was it? " queried Lagarde.

Newt mopped his face with a dirty handkerchief and replied with greater calmness, "Yes sir, that's why. I just hitched up my team an' got out of town the quickest I could travel."

"An why did you return later to confess?"

"Because, gentlemen, because I heard as Mr. Black here was blamed for it. I got my faults, gentlemen, some people says as I'm a deadbeat, an' it does seem that I ain't much of a manager, but, gentlemen, I ain't ungrateful to them as uses me right. I come to town last night because my conscience wouldn't let me sleep nights thinkin' of this thing bein' pinned onto him.

"I seen this here gentleman"—a wave of the hand in Lagarde's direction—"at noon to-day an' he said for me to come in here an' tell about it straight, an' I wouldn't get in no trouble. An' here I am, gentlemen."

"And what obligation were you under in respect to my client, Mr. Hokum?" pursued Lagarde.

"Because that young man, sir, was the only storekeeper in this here whole town who'd trust me when I was up against it. I couldn't turn down a man like that, not if I do have to go to jail for it."

He drew himself up with queerly pathetic dignity, and two large tears rolled down his cheeks.

A murmur of applause arose.

"I may say, my lord, that restitution will be made forthwith," said Lagarde.

The judge nodded. "Proceed, Mr. Lagarde."

The dramatic moment had arrived. Lagarde stood upon tiptoe, quivering with excitement.

"And now, Mr. Hokum," he said impressively, "you say you definitely identified the man you

saw leaving Isenberg's store. Please tell the jury who he was."

To Newt too, had come the realization that the culminating point of his testimony was at hand. He stiffened his back, looked defiant, and in his loudest and deepest tones proclaimed.

"The man I seen an' recognized an' would swear to anywhere was Mr. Con Gates the miller."

Two hundred odd pairs of lungs expelled simultaneously a deep breath of amazement, so that it was as if an universal sigh went up.

In the concentrated attention all were giving to the astounding statement they had just heard, no one noticed Maw Slingsby slip quietly from her seat near the door and leave the courtroom.

"My lord, I demand the production in court of Conquest Gates, as a material witness in this case," vociferated Lagarde. "And I also beg to move, my lord, that, pending his appearance, my client's case be continued to the end of the present sessions."

Both requests were granted, and the dazed Dick was conveyed back to the prison.

But a marked change had taken place in public feeling. Those who had been willing to bet not long since that he would not get off with less than seven years in the penitentiary, were now as convinced of his acquittal. As he climbed into the democrat that was to take him back to his cell, there were loud cheers from the crowd that had thronged out of the court to witness his departure.

CHAPTER XIII

THE wedding luncheon was over, all the speeches had been made and the toasts drunk, and the bride had returned for the last time to her old home to change her wedding gown for the dress in which she would take the train.

It lacked still an hour and a half to train time, and Con thought it an excellent opportunity to pay a last visit to the new mill before he set out on his honeymoon. He took a short cut across some vacant lots overgrown with bushes, which brought him out on the piece of cleared ground where the building was being erected.

As he came into the open he caught sight of Maw Slingsby's flaming red dress. She saw him almost at the same time and beckoned to him imperatively. His guilty conscience made him take a quick look around, and make sure that no one had seen him, then he plunged back into the bushes and went to Maw.

She was panting, for she had run first to the hotel. Seeing that the wedding party had broken up, she had hurried at random to the new mill.

"Come with me," she said hoarsely. "Policeman look for you now. Quick or jail for you."

They hurried by unfrequented paths through the thickets with which the whole flat was overgrown, meeting nobody,

until they reached the little log shanty where she lived. Pop was at home and stared at them.

Maw shook a finger at him and then made a horribly suggestive motion across her throat. "You talk, Cornelius," she warned, "An' I cut your damn t'roat."

She pulled up the trapdoor in the floor. "Down dhere," she said to Con. "I take care of you."

He descended into Pop's penitential retreat, and the trapdoor closed on him.

Meanwhile, the police were scouring Gateway. The McLay household was thrown into a condition of great uneasiness by the appearance of a man in scarlet asking insistently for Mr. Gates.

Told that he had said he was going to give the new mill a last inspection before train time, the puzzled workmen on the building denied that they had seen him.

Golden lay in her bed a prey to racking anxiety. To-day would be the crucial test: if Dick were convicted she felt that she would live to meet him on his release from prison. His acquittal would be her death warrant.

Pearly was downstairs, suffering almost as keenly. She ached to be in the courtroom to know how it fared with Dick and to encourage him with her glances, but Golden could no longer be left alone. She said to herself that Dick was innocent and that his innocence must be made manifest at the trial, but in her heart she was afraid of the grim, mysterious and terrible law.

She and Mrs. Black had discussed the case unnumbered times, for, with Lagarde, they were probably the only two people in town absolutely convinced of Dick's innocence. It had brought them very close to one another, and Mrs. Black had abandoned all her other sick ministrations about

town to help Pearly take care of the trying patient above stairs. But she was necessarily at the trial to-day and Pearly was left alone.

She could not keep still or busy herself with her accustomed tasks, running ceaselessly from one door to the other, to see if anyone were passing from whom she could get news of the progress of the trial.

At noon she learnt that the evidence for the prosecution was in and that the case looked very black for Dick. Golden called down imperiously for news, and she went upstairs with a heavy heart.

The sisters had not spoken of Dick since Golden's June outburst. Pearly was puzzled, she could not account for Golden's evident belief that Dick would be convicted, nor for the air of resignation, almost of eagerness, with which she seemed to view the probability.

She dared not ask herself what her own feelings for Dick were. She was aware of seething depths within her, of emotions that seemed daily to be on the point of getting beyond her control. She repeated what she had heard to Golden in a low voice.

Golden tossed her head restlessly on the pillow and her eyes glittered. "I expected it," she said with grim satisfaction.

Pearly gave her a woeful look and took her sore heart downstairs again. When her household tasks were completed, and she found that Golden had fallen asleep, she went and stood at the front door, gazing up the empty street, with its few scattered houses.

There were a few dogs in sight, a cow or two grazing at the end of a long chain, some hens busily scratching

in the dust. At long intervals a wagon rattled by or a buggy.

Then two men came in sight, one in scarlet and the other in plain clothes. Pearly caught her breath, for anything in the least unusual alarmed her that day. She was sure they were not coming to her house, but they approached steadily along the narrow plank walk, looked hard at her, and turned in at the gate. She put her hand to her breast.

The plain clothes man lifted his hat courteously. "Is Mr. Gates at home, miss?"

"No, he hasn't been home since morning," she answered. "He's down town gettin' married."

The detective shook his head. "He's left there," he said. "I am sorry, miss, but he's wanted as a material witness in the Black case and I must search the house."

"But he isn't here," protested Pearly. "Of course, you can search the house." She drew aside to let him pass in. "But my sister is very sick in her room. I hope you won't be rough with her, she's very sick."

"Certainly not, miss. Matthews you stay here in the hall and see that nobody leaves the house. Miss Gates, will you please stay where you are?"

Pearly dropped into a chair. She had always feared her brother, and in her childhood had even hated him for the cruel tricks he was continually playing on her. But she had never thought of him as a criminal. How could he be in any way connected with this robbery?

And yet she began to remember things: words dropped by chance, evasions, the secret she had felt for months to subsist between Golden and Con. But she was too loyal to probe far into that; her immediate cause of anxiety

was Golden's condition : in her weak and excitable state this visitation might have a serious effect.

She listened intently for noises from above, but could hear only the sounds made by the detective, who, having examined in turn the parlour, the dining room and the kitchen, had now descended into the basement.

She heard him moving about down there. He re-appeared. There was a black smudge across the bridge of his aquiline nose and cobwebs in his gingery moustache, but a triumphant gleam in his frosty blue eyes and a battered cashbox under his arm.

On the lid of the box was painted in crude lettering, "I. Isenberg." Con had forgotten to dispose of it after that memorable morning when he had pried it open, abstracted its contents, and thrown it with fatal carelessness into a corner.

The detective handed it to the constable with the words, "Take good care of this, Matthews, it's a valuable piece of evidence."

To Pearly he said, "Miss Gates, I must go upstairs now. You'd better come along and attend to your sister."

She preceded him up the stairs to the door of Golden's room.

"What is it, Pearly, what is it?" came a weak but excited voice from within.

Pearly hurried in to her, the detective pausing in the passage. Golden was sitting up in bed, her eyes seeming to make up half her face.

"It's nothing, dear," soothed Pearly, "Just some men come to see Con. Lie down now, please dear."

"To see Con," repeated Golden in a shrill whisper.

"Who are they? Why have they come upstairs? What do they want to see him about?"

"Just a business matter. Do lie down, honey, it's bad for you to sit up."

But Golden's bloodless fingers clung to hers with extraordinary strength. "Tell me," she insisted, "you must tell me. I know there's something wrong. Is it the police?"

She read the answer in Pearly's eyes. She recoiled and flung up her arms despairingly.

"It's all found out," she cried piercingly.

Her mouth filled with blood and choked her.

The doctor, summoned in haste, could only shake his head. It was a matter of days now, perhaps only hours.

Mrs. Black came, bubbling with talk—and heroically forbore conversation. She and Pearly sat up alternately with the dying woman in the desolate house.

Golden lingered not quite three days.

A little before the end she whispered to Pearly, "Write down what I say—get witnesses."

A neighbour was summoned by Mrs. Black and the three gathered in the little room about the bed.

"We're ready, honey," said Pearly.

Golden's eyelids fluttered open. She looked at them blankly and then her glance fell upon the pen and paper in Pearly's hands.

"Write," she whispered, "write down: I put the cheques in Dick's cash drawer," A long pause. "I was jealous of him. Now let me sign."

They lifted her. With feeble fingers, her hand steadied by Pearly, she scrawled her name. They let her down again.

"I'm sorry," she said, and spoke no more.

In silence, a little after daybreak, her untameable soul set out upon its journey into the strange land.

* * *

Gateway nearly boiled over. No such concatenation of unexpected and dramatic events had occurred in the little town since the Reil rebellion of 1885.

The Gates house, ransacked from cellar to roof, gave up all its secrets. The sack of silverware stolen from Billy Holm, and buried by Con in a corner of the basement, was unearthed. In Con's office at the mill, carelessly forgotten in his old desk, were found some of Holm's cheques. From Winnipeg came news that his trail had been picked up there, and that he had disposed of furs answering exactly in number and kind to those stolen from Isenberg.

Mrs. Black, relieved from all anxiety on Dick's behalf, and bearing no malice against the Gates family, remained with Pearly in the house of disaster.

Pearly had been left penniless; she had to sell some of the furniture to provide the cheap coffin in which poor Golden was buried. They too, were the only mourners, though some curious people stood at a distance to watch the funeral.

"You're comin' home with me," said Mrs. Black to the distraught girl. "Don't say no. You was the only soul in this town what stood by my poor boy when he was down an' as long as I got a roof over my head you got one too."

Pearly obeyed, she was in no condition just then to resist. She transferred her own personal belongings to Mrs. Black's, and closed up the forlorn and ill-omened house that had sheltered the turbulent Gates clan.

"I'll have to go out and get a job," she murmured.

"Never mind about that now," said Mrs. Black. "Haven't you got any folks?"

Pearly shook her head. "My father came out from the Old Country when he was a young man—I think he was in some trouble there. He used to curse and swear when anybody said anything about England. He married my mother down in Nova Scotia and came West. My poor mother used to cry and say he'd cut her off from her own people. I don't know anything else about 'em."

"It is hard to keep track of your folks out here," said Mrs. Black, "I don't know where the half of mine is. They was always great ones to travel—give 'em a pain to set down anywhere."

"Me, too, but I been stuck down so long in this one-horse town, I feel like I got roots. I'd just like to pick up an' travel about ten thousand mile. Oh well, you stay with me awhile until things is straightened out a little, an' then we'll see."

Meanwhile what of Con?

The cranberries were ripe under the jackpines across the Sweetwater, and Maw was accustomed to spend several days camping in the woods, picking the tiny red berries that formed a carpet on the sand.

One morning Pop brought round to the door an old and creaking democrat drawn by two scrawny shaganappies, Indian ponies little bigger than goats. From the house issued the giantess, bearing upon her mighty shoulders an enormous roll of bedding wrapped in a tent cover. This she dumped into the back of the democrat and climbed

ponderously to the seat. Pop mounted beside her and they drove off.

Pop rolled his eyes and gave a faint squeak of alarm whenever they passed anyone, whereupon his wife would give him a vicious dig in the ribs with her elbow.

People waved friendly greetings to them, and a patrolling mountie gave Maw a grin, which she answered with a deep chuckle, but no one halted them.

They drove down the river bank on to the cable ferry, which was carried across the broad stream by the strong current, climbed the opposite bank and plunged into the forest.

There came a stifled voice from the great roll of bedding in the body of the rig, "For the love of God, let me out, I'm suffocatin'."

"Keep quiet, you," replied Maw in even tones. "Worse for you in jail."

A little further on she turned off the main road upon a narrow wood trail, halted the horses, and proceeded to untie the bundle.

Con's face emerged, purple with heat, his eyes bloodshot, and his hair in wild disorder. He had not shaved for days and his clothes were stained with the damp of the cellar, a grim and sinister object. He was also in a very evil temper as he climbed down from the democrat to stretch his cramped limbs.

Maw surveyed him with a steady brooding glance. "I have keep my promise," she said in her slow careful speech, "my promise which I make to you when you pull Cornelius from dhe river. Now if you get in more trouble

I cannot help. Go with good luck and do no more bad t'ing."

Con was moved. His manner was always surly, but he said with real feeling, "Thank you, Mrs. Slingsby, I won't forget what you did for me. An' I'll go straight from now on if I get clear."

She shook her head slowly at that, with a sad premonition of his ultimate fate, but his eyes were fixed on the ground and he did not see her.

"I hope dhat," she said very gravely. "Here is grub in dhis bag. Now I say goodbye."

Without turning her head again she whipped up the ponies and left him, but Pop twisted round in his seat and his goggling eyes rested upon Con until the trees hid him.

* * *

The autumn sessions worked steadily through its usual grist of offences. A lumberjack had tapped a friend of his on the head with a whiskey bottle and was up for manslaughter. Several enterprising gentlemen had appropriated to their own use horses and cattle found loose on the prairie. An Indian from the north had stuck a knife into another Indian in an obscure dispute over trapping grounds and a woman. A hasty-tempered farmer had fired a charge of small shot into a trespassing bull, and another charge into the bull's owner during the subsequent dispute. A northern Amazon had pulled down a hundred feet of fence and driven a herd of cattle into a neighbour's oat field in retaliation for certain malicious tales spread by his wife.

Then Dick was brought down from the jail again on a

fine morning to learn his fate. This time all Gateway jammed the courtroom and overflowed into the street.

Mr. Macklin Jarvis rose and said, "My lord, the crown moves for the discharge of the accused. Evidence that has recently come into our hands puts a completely new face on matters. It entirely exonerates the accused of any complicity in the crime with which he has been charged. The crown can only express its sincere regret at the inconvenience, anxiety and financial loss to which he has been put, and is glad that a very serious miscarriage of justice has been averted."

The judge nodded.

"Richard Black," he said, "it is a pleasure to me to discharge you. You leave this court without a stain on your character."

All Gateway applauded vociferously.

Dick left the court with his mother through an elbowing throng of people anxious to shake his hand.

"I didn't know I had so many good friends in this town, ma," he said, after the last one had slapped him on the back and congratulated him.

"You're on the road up," she rejoined with unwonted cynicism, "if you'd been headed the other way, all you'd seen of them folks would be their backs."

Pearly had not come to court. Golden was only two days in her grave, Con a fugitive, and she shrank particularly from the inquisitive and often malicious eyes of the women.

She and Dick came face to face in the kitchen for the first time since their pregnant interview in the jail. It was a painful moment for both. She wondered how he could forgive her for the woes brought upon him by her family ;

his anxiety was lest she hold him accountable in some way for Golden's death and Con's ruin and her own.

He put out his hand ; hers lay cold and limp in his grasp ; they dropped apart. Neither could find words.

Mrs. Black removed her bonnet, mopped her eyes and sniffed.

" I guess you'll be hungry, son," she said. "After all what they fed you in that jail you must be near starved, an' your digestion all shot to pieces. Did you take them pills I give you ? I just bet you never did, you bein' that self-willed, an' I shouldn' wonder but what your stummick's all out of kilter. But anyways I got me a good roast of beef an' Pearly's been cookin' it. She's a good cook too—had plenty experience to home—not like some of these here young girls what can't boil water without burnin' it. That Molly McLay now . . . "

Pearly's cheeks flamed, but Dick scarcely heard. He had listened to that ever-flowing stream of words for twenty odd years now, and it passed meaninglessly over his head like wind among the trees. He was deep in his own thoughts.

He had plenty to think about. He was virtually a ruined man, for all that remained to him was the store building and the land on which it stood. Isenberg, despite his losses, had honourably paid the final instalment on the building he had bought, and the money, together with that received from the sale of Bluebird and of the stock and fixtures, had covered all the claims against him almost in full. The debts outstanding, even though many of them would prove uncollectable, could probably be counted upon to leave a very small balance in hand.

That, at least, was satisfactory. He had brought mis-

fortune upon no one else, and his name for honest dealing was unsmirched. He could begin life afresh without any hampering burden of debt, but the question was whether he should stay in town and try and get back into business, or sell the store building and seek his fortune elsewhere.

Then there was Pearly. He stole a glance at her, sitting across the table from him with her eyes on her plate. Her cheeks had lost their fullness and her mouth drooped a little. She did not look happy—one could not expect it—but she was still beautiful. He felt a mighty urge to comfort and protect her.

Her eyes lifted and encountered his. He could not read her glance. He felt suddenly confused and guilty. He cleared his throat loudly, and turned with unwonted eagerness to listen to his mother's description of the funeral of a man who had been scalped by Indians.

His constraint grew unbearable. He had to get away somewhere and consider his problems and particularly his attitude toward Pearly. He rose from the table with a muttered remark about having to go down and see Lagarde.

He encountered the little French-Canadian on the street, who welcomed him with a wave of the hand and a, "Ho, my friend, *comme ça va ?* "

"*Va bien,*" replied Dick. "I was just comin' up to see you, I didn't have time to thank you in court."

"*Tcha, tcha, tcha,*" clucked Lagarde. "Nonsense, my friend. Non-sense, it is I who should thank you. Before you come to me I have no clients—I sit in my office and count my fingers—now the clients sit on my doorstep. Yes, you would not believe. I have hired a girl with a

face so long—like a horse. She says she is stenographer, but . . .”

He flung his hands wide and laughed gaily.

“It was bad luck for you, my friend, but your misfortune was my gain. It is always so in life. If a man with a wooden head had not arrested you, my luck would still be bad. So do not thank me, anything I can do for you, do not hesitate, I am always at your service.”

“Well, if that’s so,” said Dick with a grin, “do you think it would be a good notion for me to try an’ get back in business again?”

“Why, of course, what else? You do not propose to throw away even the little you have left, do you? Man, your name is to-day good—you have a reputation for honest pay—you have been endorsed by a judge—you never had a better chance to do business.” He slapped Dick on the back. “I say to you, go on and win. Never in the world say die.”

“Begad, I believe I’ll take your advice,” said Dick.

* * *

When Molly emerged from her room, clothed in the full glory of a wonderful travelling dress, expecting to strike the men dumb with admiration and the women with envy, she saw instead a little crowd of people who looked at her with a strange expression.

Then her father, very pale, with deep lines about his mouth and his eyes like smouldering coals, said to her sternly, “Back wi’ ye to yer room an’ take they clothes off.”

“But, father, what’s the matter?”

"Back wi' ye, ye'll hear soon enough. Can ye no see the fools a' gowkin' at ye?"

He pushed her into her room, drove the guests from the house, and closed the door behind them. In a few curt words he informed her that the police were hunting Con, who had disappeared. She burst into angry tears.

There was small sign of life about the McLay household for days. The girl Margaret crept forlornly down town in the dusk to buy groceries, but no one set eyes on Molly or on her father.

Alexander McLay was a proud man as well as a thrifty one. He had held his head very high, and publicly insulted anyone who did not measure up to his conceptions of moral worth and righteousness.

The disgrace of having married his daughter to a scoundrel coupled with thoughts of the money wasted on the ceremony came close to depriving him of his reason. Even Molly dared not face him in his wrath, and kept her own room, much of the time in tears.

Alexander desired no one's pity, but the thought of being laughed at was intolerable. He took a decisive step. He placed the house in the hands of an agent for sale, and departed with his whole family a week or so later for Winnipeg.

And so Molly had what she had so long desired, but not in the way she desired it.

Con's new mill stood uncompleted and empty. Down in Winnipeg the wheat market gave itself one of its periodical shakes and his margins were wiped out. Creditors started up everywhere.

Yet for a time it seemed impossible that there would be nothing left for Pearly. A rumour presently arose that Con

had had large sums of money hidden away, and it was also asserted that he had escaped by "fixing" some mysterious "man higher up."

Meanwhile Pearly was penniless. She was still a minor, and no legal guardian could be appointed for her while Con was still at large. Her signature was valueless in the liquidation of the estate, which was soon hopelessly involved in litigation.

The poor girl was ill and listless. The strain of nursing Golden through the last trying months of her illness, terminating in a series of crushing disasters, had sapped her vitality almost to the danger point.

With returning strength and interest in life she became restless. "I can't stay here forever, Mrs. Black," she said. "You've been awful good to me, but I can't go on runnin' on you like this."

"Where's your hurry?" was the placid reply. "Stick around until you get your health back an' things gets straightened around a little. There's bound to be something comin' to you out of the business—if them lawyers don't get it all—an' you can square up with me then if you want. Meantime, we'll always have flour an' spuds an' a roof over our heads. Things is bound to brighten up some time, like I remember the dry years when there wasn't hardly even a spear of grass in the country, an' all the people was pullin' out . . ."

Dick was busy. He found his late creditors, his debts to them cleared up punctiliously, friendly and anxious to help him get on his feet again. Gateway seemed full of people only too willing to promise to deal with him as soon as he re-opened his store. If he had taken all the free

drinks offered him, he could have been drunk for a week at no expense to himself.

The situation put heart into him, and he flung himself into the work of getting the store ready for business at the earliest possible moment.

His relations with Pearly were curious during this time. He felt for her more than brotherly affection, but there was an intangible barrier between them. They were not at ease when alone together.

He would have liked to discuss many things with her. He had never fully understood Golden's part in his misfortune, for her confession had not been made public. But he could discover no way of introducing the subject: Pearly was almost always silent, she would give him a few monosyllables or perhaps a faint smile when he spoke to her, but if they happened to be left alone she would immediately slip away to her room.

The situation would have been even more difficult but for the inconsequential chatter of Mrs. Black, which flowed soothingly over all significant pauses, inscrutable glances, and moments of tension.

He encountered Bob White one day. Bob had been solicitously keeping out of his sight, but he had succeeded in picking up a drink or two that morning, and he felt bold and penitential.

He shambled up to Dick. "Can you ever forgive me, Mr. Black?" he moaned.

Dick lowered at him. "Oh, don't be a damn fool," he growled. "What in hell does it matter?"

"Oh, but Mr. Black, my conscience will never be at rest until you do."

A man must either weep or laugh at the sorry japes of the gods. Dick had learned to laugh.

"Well, if it's as cheap as that," he said with a grin, "I forgive you."

"Thank you, Mr. Black, thank you," whimpered Bob. "You know, I've suffered too. I'm broke this minute."

Dick laughed outright. "Can't make a touch with me, Bob, I'm just as badly busted to-day as you are. Here, I've just fifty cents in my pocket, I'll split it with you."

He passed on. He felt it good to be able to laugh again and worth twenty-five cents. After all, the world is a ridiculous place and man the most ridiculous of all created beings. He told the story cheerfully at supper that evening.

"You forgave him?" said Pearly with a sudden flash of her dark eyes.

"Sure I did, what's the sense of holding a mad? It wouldn't do me any good to kick the poor devil's pants."

"Don't you ever hold spite?" queried Pearly, with strange and intense eagerness.

"He never does," cut in Mrs. Black. "Always was too easy. When he was little—ten, maybe eleven, no ten—yes, he was ten. Anyway there was another boy took an' bounced a rock off of his head—you can see the mark yet. Pretty near killed him—he was all over blood an' looked awful. Well, the next day the boy comes around an' says he's sorry, an' that's all there is to it. Dick was out playin' with him again, an' his head all tied up. He's like that all the time, an' . . ."

"You see," explained Dick, "I knew I could lick him

and he knew it too. It's the same way with poor Bob."

* * *

It was after dark when Dick came charging into the house with a boyish exuberance he had not shown for many a month.

"Ma," he bawled. "Ma!"

Pearly spoke from the head of the stairs. "Mrs. Poke's little boy took very sick suddenly and they sent for your mother. I kept your supper warm in the kitchen."

"Well, come on down," urged Dick, "I have to talk to some one. Don't you give a hoot to know the big business I did to-day?"

"Oh, Dickie, did you?"

"Did I? Come on down and I'll tell you all about it."

She came tripping downstairs, and began to bustle about the kitchen, getting his food out of the oven and brewing the tea.

"Gee, I'm hungry," he said, "an' just about dead on my feet. Wow, if business keeps up like this I'll need about ten clerks. But of course it won't. Anyway I got away to a good start, and it's up to me now to keep it goin'."

He was too hungry just then to say much more, and it was not until he was well on with his supper that he began to explain in detail all that had happened. She sat down at the other end of the table and listened with sympathetic little nods and an occasional flashing smile. For the moment she had forgotten her own forlorn condition.

"There was a bunch there when I opened up, right from

the start. Curiosity, most of it, but there were some real good friends among em'. Anyway, curious or not, they bought goods an' paid for 'em. A few deadbeats tried to run their faces, but I told 'em I wasn't givin' credit to-day, I was makin' special prices for cash on the openin' day—no credit at all.

"Some of 'em didn't like it, but I don't want much business from that kind. Suppose I will have to give some credit, but I'll pick my bad debts after this—the old gang of deadbeats is out of luck with me from now on.

"They had me flyin' around all day like a flea on a hot stove. That new boy of mine's pretty good—he did his best anyway—but he got mixed up a little in the change—I think a few of 'em got away with more than was comin' to 'em. Not many though. If young Barry keeps on the way he started I'll make a crackin' good store clerk out of him. Oh, a great day, a great day. Never took in so much money in a day since the store started, I bet."

"Your mother'll be so tickled," she said.

He laughed happily. "I guess she will, all right." Then he grew serious. "I'm through foolin' from now on, I'm goin' to run my business an' do it right. I ran one good business on the rocks playin' the boob, and I'll deserve what I get if I do the same with this one. I'm goin' to make good."

"I'm sure you will," she concurred heartily.

He filled his pipe and lit it, puffing thoughtfully. She got up and began to clear away the supper dishes her face sad and pensive again.

"I'm on my feet again," he said slowly. "Of course business won't keep on the way it was to-day, but I have

promises from a lot of my old customers, and I'll get new ones. If I'm on the job, and I'm goin' to be, I can make it go, I know I can."

He took several deep puffs, and spoke with some hesitation. "And there's another thing I've been thinkin' of lately."

Their eyes met. Dick took the pipe out of his mouth and a thin curl of blue smoke spiralled upward from the bowl. She looked hastily away.

"I'm goin' to ask a girl to marry me," he said.

He paused, but she was silent, standing with her gaze fixed on a plate she held poised and forgotten in her hand.

"I hadn't anything to offer a girl, not until tonight," he went on. "I couldn't ask a girl to marry a down-and-outer. A man can't do that—not if he thinks anything of the girl. But now, well it's different. I don't think I need to be ashamed to ask a girl, eh."

Her face had turned white. "No," she murmured.

He squared his shoulders resolutely. "I want to ask you to marry me, Pearl."

She let the plate fall with a sharp sound on the table, and looked at the door with frightened eyes, but he was between her and it.

"No, no, no," she cried, "you couldn't, you couldn't."

He stood up.

"Why not?" he asked gently. "Don't you care for me?"

"Why, why, because of—Golden—and Con—what they did to you."

He made a slight gesture, as if brushing away the hovering ghosts of old wrongs.

"They're gone," he said. "What they did is nothing to do with you. You didn't know, did you?"

"No, no, of course not. I never knew a thing until the police came that day. You didn't think I knew? Dick, you didn't think that?"

"Never thought it for a moment."

"Oh, I'm glad, I was scared, I thought perhaps you did. And you don't hate poor Golden—she was sick, she didn't know what she was doin'."

He was far from sure of that. He had always disliked Golden, and if there was an unforgiving spot in his heart it was for her.

"I'm sorry for her," he said slowly, "but I wouldn't want to do her any harm even if she was alive. You can't hate dead folk."

There remained for her one deep and pregnant question, She was not to be held cheap: she wanted his whole love or she would have none.

"What about Molly McLay?"

He dismissed Molly too, with that gesture.

"I was through with her long ago, before I went to jail. We never spoke after that day and I never want to see her again. All about her is just like a bad dream now. I know I was crazy about her, but I don't know how I came to be. I feel as if I'd been out of my head for awhile and then got my senses back. Why, all of her ain't worth your little finger. I never even think about her—it's you I think about."

He was moving round the table toward her, a hand held out appealingly. She drew back into a corner and put both arms to ward him off.

"No, Dick, no."

" Why Pearl, don't you care for me ? "

" Not unless you're certain you want me—you must be certain."

" I am certain." He had hold of her wrists now. " Please, Pearl, I want to marry you—wanted to ever since you came to the jail that day."

So do a lover's emotions deceive him. He had loved her indeed, since that moment, sub-consciously, but the resolution to ask her to marry him had come only with the knowledge that he would once more be able to stand on his own feet.

He stooped and kissed her upon the temple, for her face was bent downward.

" Will you marry me, Pearl? Say yes, honey."

" Yes," she murmured in a voice scarcely audible.

The front door opened and Mrs. Black's returning voice was heard upon the threshold.

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